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March 31, 1885.

Vol. XVI. Single
Number.

PUBLISHED WEEKLY BY BEADLE AND ADAMS,
No. 98 WILLIAM STREET, NEW YORK.

Price,
5 Cents.

No. 401.



LITTLE SHOO-FLY.

A Tale of Grazing Life.

BY PHILIP S. WARNE,
AUTHOR OF "PATENT-LEATHER JOE," "LITTLE
TORNADO," "LITTLE JINGO," "LITTLE
OH-MY," ETC., ETC.

CHAPTER I.
MAMMY'S PICKANINNY.

"WHAH's mammy's pickaninny?"
"I dunno!"
"I hyeah ye, chile!"
The door flew open with a bang that made its
hinges creak.
Over the threshold shot a dark object, as if
propelled by a catapult.
A slide, a scuff, a spat of a broad-soled brogan,
and there, in the middle of the kitchen, with
hands on hips, hat cocked on the side of his
head, mouth stretched from ear to ear, and eyes
rolling in a paroxysm of jollity, stood as comical
a little darky as ever struck a pose at the finish
of a double-shuffle—stood, and delivered himself
thus:
"Go 'way, shoo-fly!"
But with a scoop he was caught into mammy's
fat bosom, as if into an animated feather-bed;
and while he struggled to get his face free, in
imminent danger of being smothered, she rock-
ed back and forth with him, crying:

"Is happy! Bress de Lamb!"
 "Look hyeah!—look hyeah!—look hyeah!"
 sputtered Little Shoo-fly, fighting for breath.
 "Hyuh! hyuh! hyuh! De good Lo'd done
 brung mammy's pickaninny back ag'in, safe an'
 soun! Dat's joy 'nough fur one day!"
 "Dat's all hunk fur you, but—"
 "Dah! dah, honey! De ole mammy's clean
 upshot—"

And choking with emotion, she covered the
 face of her offspring with tears and kisses, just
 —well, just as if her skin had been of the whitest,
 and her speech the most cultivated!

But Little Shoo-fly, like most boys, was too
 matter-of-fact for any great refinement of senti-
 ment; so he asked:

"What ye cryin' fur? Reckon, now, you's
 sorry I's hyeah!"

To him this was a joke. But mammy didn't
 take it so.

"Sorry?" she repeated, with a sort of gasp.

Then, with a sudden shift of feeling to in-
 dignant reproach, she pushed him from her, cry-
 ing:

"G'long wid ye! Reckon you l'arn yo' man-
 nehs f'om Mars' Jim's crowd! Didn't git nuffin'
 likedat o' me!"

"O-o-oh, now, mammy! look hyeah! I's only
 foolin'."

"Well, ye can't do none o' yo' foolin' roun' me!
 Go 'way!"

She waved him off peremptorily, determined
 to have nothing further to do with such an in-
 grate.

Little Shoo-fly stood before her, his face now
 as long with ruefulness as it had been round with
 fun but a moment since.

The maternal eye ran over him critically,
 perhaps with some latent suspicion that he had
 brought home a pair of torn trousers for her to
 mend. But the first glance made a far different
 discovery.

"What's dat 'ah you got hangin' to yo'— Oh,
 Lo'd a massy!"

Little Shoo-fly brightened instantly, with
 pride.

"Dis hyeah's a revolver!" he replied, giving
 the weapon its most sounding name.

He drew it from its holster with a flourish,
 leveled it at the dish-pan which hung against the
 wall, and squinting along the barrel with one eye
 closed so tight that it seemed to tie his face in a
 knot, cried:

"Crack! fizz! bang!"

Now mammy had a deadly fear of fire-arms
 —which indeed is not altogether without reason,
 when they are in the hands of the dangerous
 small boy!—so she was thrown into a blind
 panic, and in scrambling out of harm's reach
 fell over a chair, screaming lustily:

"Take it away! Take it away! Take it
 away!"

"Hyuh! hyuh! hyuh! hyuh!" laughed Little
 Shoo-fly, with a sad want of filial reverence, to
 say the least of it. "Why, look a-hyeh, mam-
 my! Dis hyeah ain't jest nuffin' at all. I's
 l'arned to shoot e'ena'most as good as Mars'
 Jim hisself. He said so. Now jest you see me
 put a hole frough dat ole tin can out yonder."

Suiting the action to the word, he fired
 through the open door, and, truth to tell, per-
 forated the can as cleverly as a more promising
 marksman might have done.

"I hain't been off wid Mars' Jim all dis time
 fur nuffin!" he said, turning proudly to receive
 the maternal wonder and admiration.

But his display of skill met with a very unex-
 pected—and it must be added, undeserved—re-
 ward.

A broom, wielded by no inexperienced hand,
 descended on his head!

"Git out o' hyeah! Git out o' hyeah, I tole
 ye!" cried mammy, following him up vigorously,
 as he shrunk before her.

"Hold on! What's—"

"Git out o' hyeah! Git out o' hyeah!"

"I's jest—"

"Git out o' hyeah! Git out o' hyeah!"

And so she ran him through the door, out in-
 to the yard.

"Hallo! What's all this?" cried a gruff
 voice.

"Hal! hal! hal!" laughed another, equally
 hoarse. "The leetle imp has met with a hot re-
 ception!"

"Hold on, mammy! What's the matter with
 Shoo-fly?" asked a third, as manly as the other
 two, but more cultivated.

Then mammy paused for breath, and resting
 on her broom, looked up into a smiling, genial
 face, framed in a handsome black beard and
 shaded by the broad brim of a soft felt hat.

"Mars' Jim," she panted, "what you bring
 dat young rapsallion back hyeah fo'?"

"Oh, come, now, mammy! you don't mean
 that! What would you do—what should any
 of us do without Shoo-fly?"

"Don't ye talk to me! Dat little limb done
 brung his ole mammy nuffin' but sorer an' trib-
 ulation ebber sence he was bawn!"

"What! Little Shoo-fly? Why, he's the jol-
 liest little chap that ever was. Ain't he, boys?"

The men thus appealed to laughed boisterous-
 ly while they gave in their assent.

But it was plain that mammy didn't think
 this a question to be settled by a count of noses.
 She held to her majority of one.

"He's altogedder too jolly fur my likin'!" she
 affirmed.

Whereupon Little Shoo-fly proceeded to plead
 his own cause, struggling against an inclination
 to "biubber."

"Look a-hyeh, Mars' Jim!" he urged, plain-
 tively. "I hain't done jest nuffin' at all—deed
 I hain't!"

"Wha's dat you say?" cried mammy, indig-
 nantly. "Didn't you done skeer me 'mos' ter
 deff?"

"But, mammy, that was only his fun."

"I tole ye what it is, Mars' Jim. I don't like
 no sich fun!"

"But you'll overlook it this time? If you only
 knew how Little Shoo-fly has counted on getting
 back to his mammy! The first thing he thought
 of was that he could show you how he has
 learned to shoot. I tell you, he can beat some
 of the men!"

At this praise Little Shoo-fly grinned from ear
 to ear, and looked at mammy, to see if she could
 be proof against such glory.

"I's afraid o' pistols an' guns!" she declared.

But the softening in her voice showed that she
 was somewhat mollified.

"An' I reckon," she added, "dey'll be de deff
 ob dat chile!"

"No, dey won't!" cried Little Shoo-fly, stout-
 ly. "But ef I don't crack ober some o' dese
 hyeah—"

"That'll do!" interrupted "Mars' Jim," with
 an indulgent smile. "I don't wonder that
 mammy is afraid of such a sanguinary young
 pirate! Come! make off with you."

"Whoop! Go 'way, shoo-fly!"

And cutting a pigeon's-wing that carried his
 brogan higher than his head, Little Shoo-fly
 leaped away in the direction of the stables.

One of the herders, of whom there were a score,
 more or less, struck him with his hat as he pass-
 ed; and the others catching the humor of the
 thing, Little Shoo-fly ran this good-natured
 gantlet, the most delighted one of the party.

Mars' Jim turned to mammy, and while his
 eye ran with furtive anxiety over the low ramb-
 ling ranch-house, asked:

"Where's father?"

"He's gone wid de missus down to de Flat.
 Been gone right smart. 'Spec'dey'll be back
 putty soon. Reckon dey didn't count on you
 bein' home."

Then a covert twinkle came into her eyes; but
 speaking in the most innocent manner possi-
 ble, she went on:

"Shouldn't wondeh, now, ef Missy Lina was
 gallivantin' roun' some'r's—down by de falls,
 mose likely."

"Mammy," said Mars' Jim, dropping his
 voice and scrutinizing the old auntie's face with
 watchful anxiety, "is—is—Miss Lina—happy?"

"Happy?"

"Yes. You know she ain't used to this kind
 of life. It must seem rather rough to her. Do
 you think she takes to it kindly? She might
 feel—homesick, you know."

"She hain't said nuffin' to me," said mammy,
 non-committally.

"No—of course not. But how does she look?
 How does she act?"

"Chipper—most o' the time."

"Most of the time? Does she ever look sad—
 lonely?"

"Well, now an' ag'in she sets all alone by her-
 self, lookin' away off, kind o'."

"Yes! Yes!"

"Not a-sayin' nuffin' to nobody."

"Go on!"

"Wid her head on one side—so—jest like de
 little bird."

"Yes! Well?"

"Den she heab a sigh—'way down deep."

Mars' Jim waited with compressed lips, his
 cheeks pale, and his eyes gloomy with trouble.

"Den she jump an' look roun', skeered ef
 somebody hyeah'd her. Den she up an' run
 away, wid her cheeks red an' her eyes a-shinin',
 smilin' all to herse'f, an' singin' as ef de joy hab
 to come out dat-a-way, or she bu'st sure!"

Mars' Jim stood staring open-mouthed, be-
 wildered at this unexpected denouement.

Mammy turned her head so as to glance up at
 him out of the corner of her eye.

Then her fat stomach began to shake up and
 down—a motion which gradually extended all
 over her body; after which she shut her eyes
 and began to rock from side to side. No sound
 escaped her; she even ceased breathing while
 that internal convulsion set her quivering like
 a great lump of jelly.

A sudden flush leaped to Mars' Jim's temples.
 With a spasmodic motion he caught her wrist,
 panting breathlessly:

"What do you mean?"

"Go 'way boy!" she cried, as if exploding
 with the pent forces within her.

Then she went off in a long roll of laughter.

"He! he! he! he! he! he! he! he! he! Go
 'way! You don't want nuffin' o' de ole mammy!
 Go ask Missy Lina what she mean! He! he! he!
 he! he! he! he!"

And leaving Mars' Jim pale and trembling,
 and with the perspiration starting from every
 pore, she waddled to her kitchen.

There she stood in the middle of the floor, slap-
 ping her fat knees and bending almost double in
 her struggles with the imps of mirth.

"Oh, dat boy! He! he! he! he! he-e-e-e-e-e-
 he-e-e-e-e-e-e-e-e-e-e!"

Her sides ached as she squeezed the last parti-
 cle of breath out of her body. She managed to
 make her way to a chair, and there again and
 again was she convulsed, until the tears ran
 down her black cheeks and it seemed as if she
 would roll out of her seat.

Her hint had set Mars' Jim afire. The blood
 surged up into his face in waves, and receded
 again.

Now he was swept away by a whirlwind of
 mad elation. Anon he flared up with anger at
 mammy, as if she had been guilty of some out-
 rage. Then he was overwhelmed with self-
 abasement.

"Oh, I'm a fool—a confounded ass!"

But the blood tingled through every vein with
 a mad delight, and set his muscles in motion.
 With his head in a whirl, he did not heed where
 his rapid strides were bearing him. It was cer-
 tainly with no conscious purpose that he went
 down a little glen which wound away back of
 the ranch into denser and denser shadow, until
 he found his way to as romantic a dell as ever
 Greek lover courted the Muses in.

What he found there—we shall know pres-
 ently!

CHAPTER II.

A DESPERATE LOVER.

THE dell had been perfectly still, save the
 music of a tiny waterfall, for so long that a bob-
 olink, rocking on a sprig not ten feet from the
 ground, poured forth his joy in full-throated
 melody.

Almost directly beneath him sat a young girl
 on a boulder.

Her dress was of soft muslin, which seemed to
 cling lovingly to her figure, unlike the starched
 calico one would expect to find in that wild
 country—"a thousand mile west o' nowhar!"
 Moreover, though perfectly simple, it had a
 grace about it which showed that it must have
 been made "in the States."

Beside her on the ground lay a broad-brimmed
 straw hat, filled with ferns and grasses and wild
 flowers.

She was not looking in the brook that rippled
 by over yellow and red and brown pebbles.
 Not—her eyes rested with a strange, sweet shy-
 ness on the golden sand that stretched as smooth
 as a tablet from her feet to the water's edge.

On it she had traced with a willow rod the
 name:

"JAMES REARDON."

Below this she had written, in the same deli-
 cate script, with graceful curves and curls here
 and there, like the tendrils of a vine:

"LINA RE—"

So far she got in her work, and then dropped
 her hot face in her hands, bowed until it rested
 on her knees.

"Are you sad in your wilderness home?" asked
 a voice close beside her.

With a scream the girl leaped up.

One lightning sweep of her foot, and the writ-
 ing on the sand was effaced.

Then with pale lips, panting bosom, and flash-
 ing eyes, she turned to confront the speaker.

It was a man of fine physique, and not unpre-
 posing countenance, dressed in the rough
 garb of the Pacific Slope, yet wearing it with a
 certain jaunty grace, so that it took its character
 from his personality, instead of determining his
 place in the social scale.

His hair was brown, his whiskers becoming

sandy at the ends. His features were good. His eyes had a boldness about them which most women would have rather liked.

Just now they burned internally, and he was pale, as with suppressed emotion.

Had he seen and deciphered the writing on the sand?

"Mr. Caldor!" cried the girl, "what right had you to steal upon me like this?"

A flush swept to his brow, showing that the evidence of indignation in her voice had cut deep; yet he said, in conciliatory tones:

"I beg your pardon, Miss Merrill! I did not mean to startle you. But you were so deeply absorbed, and what with the noise of the cascade and the softness of the turf—"

He did not finish.

The girl pressed her hand over her beating heart, and bent to pick up her hat.

"Allow me!" he said, springing forward so quickly as to anticipate her.

He lifted the hat with reverent touch, and presented it to her with the ease of a polished gentleman.

"Thank you!" she said, receiving it from him, but not raising her eyes.

Had she done so quickly, she might have surprised a danger signal in his glance. The white circle that formed about his lips might have warned her. But his voice, under better control, was still gently deprecatory.

"You are not going to punish me by deserting me at once?"

"I—ought to go to the house. I am momentarily expecting Mr. and Mrs. Reardon's return."

He knew that this was an evasion. He bit his lip.

"We can hear them as they drive up. Will you not give me a few minutes, until then?"

"You forget the waterfall!"—with a faint smile.

"I shall never forget or forgive it, since it has been the means of winning me your displeasure!"

He spoke with an intensity of passion which gave unmistakable significance to his words. He looked into her eyes with a burning earnestness that startled her.

"I—I beg your pardon!" she stammered, in confusion. "You must let me go—at once!"

"Stay!"

He caught her wrist as she sought to pass him. She started back, more in surprise and indignation than alarm.

"Mr. Caldor!"

And she transfixed him with a woman's weapon offensive and defensive—the glance of her eye.

He dropped her arm instantly.

"I beg your pardon!" he said, bowing before her with as great humility as even she could require. "I am going from bad to worse, it appears. But—but there are times when one breaks over the icy barrier of politeness. You see, it was made for men who are run by clockwork and women of—of Parian marble. It certainly becomes an iron manacle to a man who has a heart in his body, especially when that heart happens to have gone out to a woman who—who does not—who fails to—"

He stood before her with clinched hands, and teeth set down hard on his nether lip. He was as pale as death, and his eyes fairly burned her!

She stood gazing into his face, frightened out of speech.

"I see you understand me," he said. "It has come to that!"

Still she could not find voice.

"Have you nothing to say to me?" he asked.

A look of pain came into her face.

"I think—I hope—for your sake—you are mistaken! I—I—"

But the words died on her lips. She interlaced her fingers piteously, and her eyes filled.

"I am making it hard for you," he said. "I see I must tell you in words that I love you."

Then, with a quick abandonment to the strong emotion that swayed him, he dropped upon his knee, and extending his hands, cried out her name with intense passion:

"Lina!"

"Oh, no! no! no!" she cried, shrinking back and repulsing him with her hands.

At that he bounded to his feet with a roar of fury.

He did not articulate a word; but the girl stood appalled by the expression of his countenance.

Then her ears were gladdened by what seemed to her the sweetest sound she had ever heard.

It was a voice crying lustily:

"Go 'way, shoo-fly!"

For a moment George Caldor stood irresolute.

Then he seemed to grind an oath of rage between his teeth.

Finally he opened his lips, as if to speak a last word to the girl whose love he had sought in vain, but, changing his mind, turned and sprung away into the undergrowth, without farewell by speech or gesture.

If he had looked back, he might have seen Little Shoo-fly leap into view but an instant after he had vanished, and Lina Merrill, nearly fainting, catch both of the little black paws of "mammy's pickaninny," with a tremulous cry of relief and eager welcome.

He did not see this; but before he got beyond earshot he heard a peal of laughter in her musical soprano.

"That, then, is how much impression my love has made upon her!" he muttered between his set teeth. "It is matter of jest for her. I suppose she is telling that accursed milk-sop!"

He was not thinking of Little Shoo-fly, but that Mars' Jim had followed his young Mercury.

He drove his spurs into his horse's flanks as some vent for his impotent rage, and coursed madly over the prairie.

But the phantom of the favored lover pursued him, ride he never so fast; and he cast about in his fevered brain for some means of circumventing him.

"There is but one thing, and that is to kill him!" was his final conclusion. "With him above-ground there is no hope for me. But what good will come of it? She will shrink in horror from a man with his blood on his hands! But he shall not have her either. Curse him! what right has he to stand in my path? If I down him in a general fight, nothing can be done about it."

"That's it! that's it!" he muttered, with ghoul-like triumph. "If we get on the land first, he will fight for it. He then is the aggressor, and I stand justified! I'll kill him! I'll kill him, so help me God!"

This conclusion reached, he wheeled his horse and dashed back almost over the course he had come.

As he approached a wood not more than a mile from the spot where he had met with his rebuff, he heard the dull thud of hoofs and the swish and crackle of branches thrust roughly aside.

"What's that? Some of his men hunting? It won't do to be seen by them!"

And he glanced about for some means of secreting himself until the chase was past.

But a look of uncertainty and anxiety succeeded, as another thought flashed through his mind.

"It can't be any of my own men? They wouldn't dare to kick up such a row for anything that runs on four legs. If it is them—"

He finished the menace with a frown.

While he hesitated between the necessity of hiding if it was his enemy's followers and stopping the chase if it proved to be his own, the opportunity for the former passed.

Out of the wood dashed a horse at full speed, his rider lying along his neck to escape the danger of being swept off or at least lashed in the face by the branches.

At a little distance in his rear came a troop of riders in headlong pursuit.

One of the last-mentioned called to Caldor on sight; and with an oath of surprise and anger he put spurs to his horse and dashed forward to intercept the fugitive.

CHAPTER III.

A TONGUE-TIED LOVER.

"Oh, Clem! I'm so glad to see you!" cried Lina, in the rebound of her feelings.

Little Shoo-fly's eyes glistened, and his mouth spread from ear to ear.

"Is you, missy?"

"Why, of course I am! What have you been doing all the time you have been away?"

"Oh, lots!"

"Forgetting your best friends, I'll warrant!"

"Not you, pretty missy!"

"Hush! None of that! You haven't read a line, I know."

"Well—ye see—Missy Lina—"

"Oh, yes! I see that you haven't seen the inside of a book or paper this two months!"

"But I hain't furgit how to spell physic!"—triumphantly.

"How do you spell it?"

He set out at railroad speed, panting and gasping, shifting his weight from one foot to the other, hitching his hands up, wriggling his shoulders, and rolling his eyes until it seemed as if they would pop out of their sockets.

"Fee-i-iz, phys!"

But Lina interrupted him with a ripple of laughter.

"Ha! ha! ha! ha! ha! ha! ha!"

One of her own sex would have detected that it was hysterical. Her nerves yet quivered from the strain to which they had been subjected.

It was unfortunate that the sound reached the ears of the man who was fleeing her presence with his soul on fire—struck upon his heart-strings with a jar that maddened him.

Unconscious of this, Lina replied to her dervish pupil:

"Oh, no, Clem! That's the old way."

"De ole way?"

"Your way, you know. Nobody but such a genius for the unheard-of as Mr. Clem Johnson could ever perform such ground and lofty tumbling in spelling! I think your brains take the infection from your nimble heels, Clem."

"Spec' dey do, missy!" assented Little Shoo-fly, with a good-natured grin.

Then he went off at a tangent, hoping to hide his blunder in the glory of his achievement in another direction.

"But I tell ye what it is, Missy Lina! I'a larned to shoot, I has!"

And with the quick dexterity which comes only of practice added to natural aptitude, he clapped his hand to his back and whipped out his weapon.

"Look out, Clem! Don't point it this way, please!"

"No, siree! I's powerful keeful o' you, I is! Ain't taking no chances, nohow!"

"Thank you!"

"D'ye see dat knot yondah, dat look jes' like a chipmunk peekin' roun' de cawneh?"

"Yes."

"Well, mind yer eye! I's goin' to raise de bark off'n dat 'ah! Now den!"

A quick crack. Then a little scream.

"Oh! Why, Clem! that's capital! Who taught you to shoot so well?"

She turned her lustrous eyes upon the boy, her voice softening into a low, gliding, tremulous music, and a delicate color played in her cheeks.

"Mars' Jim!" answered Little Shoo-fly, proudly. "Tell ye what it is!—he's a good one; ain't he, Missy Lina?"

The blush-rose in her cheek showed its heart more fully.

Instead of answering, she turned her head slightly, in the attitude of listening, while her eyes went past him up the defile.

Little Shoo-fly, whose ears were as sharp as hers, heard a heavy tread coming down the glen. Its firm, soldier-like regularity could not be mistaken.

"Hi! Dah's somebody comin'!" cried the knowing urchin. "Reckon a little skyoodle dat you an' me knows, better make hisse'f skeerse roun' h'yeah 'bout dis time o' day!"

"Oh! don't go away!" cried Lina, in sudden panic.

"Mars' Jim hain't got no use fur dis chile! Seps too much ob him ebbery day to be took wid his style o' beauty! Go 'way, shoo-fly!"

And flinging his heels into the air, he left his friend, with her forces all in disarray, to meet the enemy alone.

But a plucky little woman never says die!

Lina turned her back in the direction whence Mars' Jim was coming, and pretended to be greatly amused looking after Little Shoo-fly.

"Miss Lina!"

"Oh! Mr. Reardon, how you startled me!"

She gave a little jump in the most natural manner possible, as she faced about.

Then she extended her hand with a welcoming smile, saying archly:

"I am glad to see you back. But there is one who has been beforehand with you paying his respects!"

And, lo! she was perfect mistress of herself, and Mars' Jim, who could look down the bore of an enemy's revolver without blinking, was routed, horse and foot!

She chatted with charming vivacity while she walked toward the house, and he, burning to ask her to stop or go in the opposite direction, kept pace beside her like a bashful school-boy!

So they came in sight of the house, where she was surprised to find the stable-yard full of men and horses.

The animals were turned loose to rest, their saddles and bridles of elaborately-stamped Mexican leather being piled on the ground or hung over the branches of trees, according to the care of their riders.

The men, in their not less picturesque garb—jingling spurs, fringed leggins, sashes, many-buttoned jackets and broad-brimmed sombreros.

—lounge about as they listed, ready to put foot to stirrup at a moment's notice.

"Well! well!" she cried, gayly, "your men have made the most of going to Mexico, by tricking themselves out in fine feather—haven't they? I am almost ready to take you for a captain of banditti!"

Mars' Jim longed to tell her that it would be more to his taste if she would take him for a husband; but the cold perspiration started at thought of such boldness!

"We met with such exceptional good-luck," he said, "that I was in the humor to make the boys whatever advances were necessary to enable them to gratify their whims in the matter of toggerly."

"But where are your cattle—to 'crown a thousand hills,' 'make the earth tremble beneath their multitudinous tread,' and all that sort of thing?"

"If you were thirty miles to the southwest as the crow flies, you might possibly have your wildest fancies realized."

"What should I see?"

"Five or six miles fairly covered with grazing beeves, with a herder here and there riding along the outskirts, keeping them together."

"So many as that? Oh, how I should like to see them! When will they reach here?"

"I am sorry to say that this isn't their destination."

"What are you going to do with them, then?"

"Bamley met me with the intelligence that he has secured the garden-spot of the Slope, not less than fifty miles almost due northwest from here."

"And you are going to graze them there?"

"Yes."

"Then the herd is as near as it is going to be?"

"Just about."

"And I shall have no opportunity of seeing it at all?"

"At the expense of a sixty-mile ride, there and back."

Then the honest fellow blurted out his next thought aloud. The fact was, he wanted to gratify her.

"If you were only a western girl, now—used to this sort of thing—"

"Well, I declare, sir!" she cried, bridling with quick spirit. "Don't you suppose an eastern girl can do anything that a western girl ever dreamed of doing? I'd ride it if it were a hundred miles!"

His radiant face and wondering eyes showed his appreciation of her spirit.

"You shall ride it!" he cried, "with Little Shoo-fly as your escort."

She flashed a glance of surprise into his face, and the sensitive color faded from her cheeks.

"I should contest with him for the honor," he added, quickly, "but that I have only an hour to spare for the resting of my horses, and must be in the saddle again."

"So soon? But to go whither, if not back to your herd?"

"To our new site. By rights, I ought to be there now."

"And you came so far out of your way?"

"To bid you good-morning."

Mars' Jim was now getting on famously. He bent over her and threw into his voice a cadence that thrilled her through and through.

She quickly shifted her position off that dangerous ground.

"But what is your desperate hurry? Won't the ground wait for you?"

"I wish I felt sure that it would!" laughed Mars' Jim.

She looked at him inquiringly.

"We're likely to have a case of disputed title on our hands," he explained. "And possession, you know, is nine points in the law. If one gets a decent piece of land in California, he must expect to fight an old Spanish grant, fraudulent or otherwise."

"But you do not anticipate trouble—serious trouble, I mean?"

"Not if we get there first!" said Mars' Jim, with a light laugh.

"Who is the rival claimant?"

"George Caldor."

"Oh! do not get into a conflict with him!"

The blood fled her cheeks, and even her lips, as with quick fright; and in her earnestness she laid her hand on Mars' Jim's arm.

"Why not?" he asked, a pang of jealous suspicion shooting through him.

But before she could reply, if she would have done so, a hearty voice hailed him:

"Hallo, Jim, my boy! Back again?"

It was followed by a second greeting, at two octaves higher pitch:

"Oh, Jimmy!"

They had passed the corner of the house and come into view of "Father and Mother" Reardon.

The old gentleman had thrown the reins over the horses' backs, and was standing up in front of the light spring-wagon, preparatory to alighting, while his wife sat beside him, with a loose bundle in her lap, the corners of a newspaper being brought together and pinned in a way that suggested a "Sunday-go-to-meeting" bonnet.

Mars' Jim ran forward to assist his mother out of the wagon, and the next few minutes were taken up with eager greetings.

After that he had no opportunity to get Lina alone and learn what interest she had in George Caldor. It did not occur to him that her interest might be in himself!

In the midst of a pleasant family reunion they were startled by a furious clatter of a horse's hoofs, and Little Shoo-fly's voice calling frantically:

"Mars' Jim! Mars' Jim!"

CHAPTER IV.

RUNNING THE GANTLET.

LITTLE SHOO-FLY was possessed of the demon of restlessness.

His next move, after leaving Lina, was to catch the first horse he could lay his hands on, and scour away at breakneck pace, to visit all his old haunts, and see what had happened during his absence.

Cave or crag, hollow tree or "dead hole" in the brook—everything that a small boy could climb, or creep into, or poke with a stick, had its association.

His rounds included a wood about a mile away, which he expected to find deserted.

What then was his surprise to dash headlong into the midst of a party of horsemen?

They were dismounted, but their horses yet champed the bit and chafed under the saddle. This showed that their stay was but a transient one, while the restlessness of some of the men was evidence that they were impatient to be off.

Just before the appearance of Little Shoo-fly one of them had muttered to a comrade:

"I'd like to know what keeps the boss. We'll be a day after the fair, ef he don't look out."

"That's so," was the reply.

"I don't see what was to be gained by trampin' all round Robin Hood's barn, when we could have made a bee-line for the place. Here we've come five miles out of the way, at least."

"I reckon the boss has his own ideas."

"Maybe he has. Hallo! What's this?"

It was Little Shoo-fly.

Seeing that he had run into something unexpected, he drew his horse on his haunches, and sat staring at the men, who stared as hard at him.

"Boys," cried one, guardedly, "it's Reardon's little ducky!"

"The deuce it is! He don't bring no good luck to us."

"You bet he don't! Ef Reardon's on hand and he gives us away—"

"Button up yer lip! What's to be done! The boss had orter be hyar."

"But as he ain't, we'll have to do it ourselves, whatever it is, and mighty quick too!"

This suggestion was made pertinent by the actions of Little Shoo-fly.

"Caldor's crowd!" he muttered to himself.

"Mars' Jim orter know dis!"

And without a word he wheeled his horse for instant flight.

"Boys! that youngster has got to be stopped, or he'll blow the whole thing!"

"Stop him then!"

"Hallo, you, Sam!"

"Dat ain't dis chile's name!" cried Little Shoo-fly, over his shoulder, meanwhile not losing any time in putting the greatest distance possible between himself and the enemy's forces.

"Hold on, hyar, I say! We want to speak to you."

"Hain't got no time, marse! I's got a call a good ways from hyeah!"

"After him! Don't let the little whelp escape!"

With exasperated oaths they sprung into the saddle.

Little Shoo-fly plied his heels, and yelled to his horse.

Then a pell-mell chase followed.

"Take the straightest course to the open, boys. We've got to head him off! Remember; there's money in this thing."

But Little Shoo-fly was as sharp as they make 'em! He knew that he had no time to follow

the winding cattle-paths. He too took a straight course through the woods, lying close down upon his horse's neck as they swept under the branches that threatened to brush him off.

"Pard, he's goin' to best us," cried one of the men.

"I believe my soul he will, ef we trust to heels alone."

"What's to be done, then?"

"Would the boss stand it ef we was to drop his horse?"

"He'd stand anything rather than be beat."

"Waal, hyar goes then!"

Drawing a revolver, the speaker pulled up his horse and took deliberate aim.

"Hold on! You may hit the youngster!"

"So much the worse for him!"

Crack!

Little Shoo-fly's horse gave a spasmodic bound, as if he felt the touch of the spur.

"Gorry-mighty!" cried the boy to himself, his eyes bulging with alarm. "Dey's powerful despr'it! Dey'll scotch dis nig, ef dey cotch 'im, sure!"

But the irregular movements of his horse and the swish of the boughs as he brushed through them were at once his protection and his peril; for while it was thus made difficult to hit either, yet, the aim being at the animal, it was as likely to take effect in one as the other.

So swept the mad rout through the underbrush, Little Shoo-fly holding his own, until they reached the open prairie.

There they came upon George Caldor hastening to the execution of his jealous revenge.

"It is that little imp of darkness," he cried, "and my men after him! What can it mean?"

"Head him off!" yelled the foremost of Little Shoo-fly's pursuers.

Then Caldor took in the situation, and with a furious oath dug the rowels of his spurs into his horse's flanks so deeply as to cause him to bound forward with a shrill cry of pain and rage.

"Dat settles dis chile!" cried Little Shoo-fly to himself, in despair.

"Halt there!" shouted Caldor.

But now our little hero gathered courage from the very desperation of his fix.

"Dey'll scotch me anyway, ef dey cotch me!" he muttered; "so might as well be hanged fur a sheep as a lamb. But ef I git frough, Mars' Jim he'll stan' by me ag'in' dat Caldor. I know dat, ebbery time. Reckon dey won't flax Mars' Jim out o' dat 'ah land ef I kin help it!"

So he quietly resolved to take a leaf out of his enemies' book.

Without changing his course, he kept his horse at his highest speed.

"You little fool!" cried Caldor, "don't you know that you can't get by me? Halt, I say!"

Little Shoo-fly made no reply, but kept on, the distance between them rapidly decreasing.

"I'll tie you up to a tree and lash the life out of you, if you don't do as I tell you!"

Still Little Shoo-fly was mute, only keeping his eye upon Caldor as he approached.

And now a few more bounds would fetch them together. Caldor ripped out a volley of oaths, and reached forth his hand in readiness to seize Little Shoo-fly's bridle.

"Not dis ebening, boss!" said our little hero.

"Some udder ebening!"

And suddenly whipping out his revolver, he fired at the head of the animal which his would-be captor bestrode.

"Hi!" he yelled, as the horse went to the ground with a crash, hurling his rider over his head, so that he fell directly under the feet of Little Shoo-fly's beast.

The latter leaped over the whirling body, and sped on.

Behind, the followers of the fallen leader set up a yell of astonishment and rage.

George Caldor was considerably shaken up, though not stunned. A fall upon the soft prairie loam need not be a very serious matter, if one is fortunate enough not alight on one's head!

He scrambled to his feet so bewildered as not to have a very clear apprehension of what was going on as the horses of his men swept by him.

One drew up, dismounted, and put a sustaining arm about him.

"Boss, air you hurt?"

"Why, I hardly know. What—"

He rubbed the dirt out of his eyes, and stared at his supporter.

"It's an ugly fall," said the man, trying to tone his voice down to soothing cadences.

"Yes—yes," assented Caldor, slowly.

Then he looked after the horsemen.

"The kid flummixed you," said his companion, helping him.

His wits then came back with a flash.

"Reardon's boy, Shoo-fly?"
 "Yes."
 "Where's my horse?"
 "Fixed fur good, I reckon. He ain't moved sense he dropped."
 They hastened over to the fallen animal. Little Shoo-fly's shot had been most effectual. It was dead beyond a peradventure.
 "Will he get away?"
 "I'm afraid he will. That's no slouch of a mount he's got."
 "The men have stopped shooting at him."
 "More'n that—they're pullin' up."
 This was true. The chase had been abandoned. The men had the good sense not to follow the boy too near to his own home, where his friends would have come to his rescue, and thus brought on a general engagement.
 In that wild country, where the lines of law were not very clearly drawn, they might have captured Little Shoo-fly and held him a prisoner until it was too late for his warning to be prejudicial to them, and the thing would have passed as sharp practice.
 As it was, he had cleverly turned the tables on them.
 Their only plan now was to make the most of the few minutes' start they would yet have of their rivals.
 George Caldor ordered his men to make a dead break for the place they hoped to get possession of.
 "Don't stop to go in a body. The first man on the ground gets a hundred dollars! Once there, defend the place at the mouth of the revolver and the point of the bowie! I assume the responsibility! Come, away you go!"
 And away they did go, pell-mell, helter-skelter, every man for himself and—
 Little Shoo-fly, as we know, dashed up to the Reardon ranch, yelling lustily:
 "Mars' Jim! Mars' Jim!"

CHAPTER V.

TO HORSE! TO HORSE!

"WHAT's that?" cried Mars' Jim, starting up.
 "It's Clem," responded Lina. "He's calling you!"
 "And he wouldn't make such a row without good cause."
 All ran to the door, Mars' Jim in advance.
 Little Shoo-fly was just throwing himself from his horse.
 "What's the matter?"
 "Oh, Mars' Jim! Don't lose a minute's time! Git de men an' hosses ready! We-uns has got to cl'ar out o' dis!"
 "Come, come! brace up! What are you trying to get through you?"
 "It's dat Caldor! He's out yon—him an' his crowd!"
 "Caldor! Out where?"
 "Out in de bresh—'bout a mile off! Dey come nigh cotchin' dis chile! An' jes' look at dat hoss!"
 "Why, he has been shot!"
 "Dat's so. I's jest lookin' roun' a bit, an' I run in on 'em like a nest o' hornets. Dey yelled to me fur to hold on; but you bet I slid out o' dat like as if I was greased. Den dey took arter me, an' tried to shoot de hoss, so's I couldn't come to you an' blow on 'em. Jest on de aige ob de perairy, dah we come onto Mars' Caldor hisse'f. Den he tried fur to pull me up. But I reckoned what was sass fur de goose was sass fur de gander; so I let drive at his hoss's head, an' flummixed him— Oh, golly! Hyuh! hyuh! hyuh! Reckon I hain't l'arned fur to shoot fur nuffin!"
 "Caldor and his men!" repeated Mars' Jim, turning and looking into Lina's face.
 The girl flamed scarlet, and could not meet his questioning gaze.
 A pang of jealous fear shot to his heart, taking all the strength out of him.
 He turned deadly pale, but walked straight up to her and put his hand on her shoulder.
 "Lina," he began, brokenly, "if you—"
 "Oh, no! no!" she interrupted him, divining his meaning. "Don't think so for an instant! Go! go! without losing a moment's time!"
 He caught her hand with the fever of passion surging through him.
 "It is not true?" he cried.
 "No! no!" she assured him.
 "I have your word?"
 "Yes!"
 "God bless you—"
 He bent close to her, so that his astonished parents, who saw his actions, could not hear the rest, and finished in her ear:
 "My darling!"
 She broke away from him and ran back to the house—turned in the doorway, and looked back

at him with her eyes suffused with happy tears and her cheeks scarlet with maiden shame.
 His heart was swelling as if his body were not big enough to hold it. He was ready to try conclusions with George Caldor now!
 "Men!" he shouted, "to horse at once! Caldor has been reconnoitering us, and has not more than two miles' start. Are we going to let his crowd cut in ahead of us?"
 "Never!" was the unanimous response.
 And in a twinkling the stable-yard was converted into a perfect pandemonium of hurry and confusion.
 Little Shoo-fly sprung away to get a fresh horse for himself.
 At this moment mammy made her appearance at the door of her kitchen.
 "What's all dis?" she cried. "Is all my boys gwine fur to cl'ar out an' leabe dis hyeah good dinneh what I's been cook'n' fur 'em?"
 "We'll have to take a round meal to-day," said Mars' Jim.
 A "round meal," as distinguished from a "square meal," is, be it understood, drawing up your belt one hole further!
 "Waal, I 'clar to goodness!" cried mammy, in undisguised disgust, "dis hyeah's de fu'st time I ebber see hungry men run away f'om good victuals! What's to be done wid all dis hyeah meat an' t'ings?—dat's what I want to know!"
 But no one stopped to make any suggestions.
 Mars' Jim was flying about as busy as the busiest of his men.
 "Muster every man on the place!" he directed. "We may have warm work before we get through with this thing."
 "That's jest what 'll suit us!" cried one of the men.
 And this sentiment was cheered by all the rest.
 With men of their class partisanship runs so high that they would rather fight than eat. It makes little difference to them individually whether their employer is right or wrong—it is whipping their rivals that they think about.
 In an incredibly short time every available man about the premises was in the saddle except old Mr. Reardon. Even he took the infection of excitement and was for going; but Mars' Jim said no.
 "We'll leave you as the home-guard," he said, laughing.
 "What! you take me for a non-combatant?" cried the old gentleman, straightening himself up. "I'd have you to know that I'm not past my usefulness yet, by a long way!"
 "For a good many things, father. But when it comes to fighting, we'll put you on the retired list."
 "See here, Jim! You don't look for a pitched battle with that scalawag?"
 "Not if we get on the land first. We've got enough good men to stand him and his crowd off without actual burning of powder."
 "But if they get there first?"
 "Well, we'll have to see what can be done after we reach the field."
 "Don't expose yourself, Jim, unnecessarily!"
 "You may depend on that!"
 He was thinking of Lina as he spoke. He now had something which made it worth his while not to throw away his life for the mere fun of the thing!
 "Hi, Shoo-fly!" he cried, as our little hero came dashing up on a fresh horse.
 "On deck, Mars' Jim!" responded Little Shoo-fly, with soldier-like promptness.
 "Get outside of three or four mouthfuls of grub the quickest you ever did in your life, and then make a bee-line for the herd. Tell Dorn to send every man he can spare up to the new run. Tell him that it's business, and we don't want any lagging. But if the boys have to pass Caldor's crowd, they're to be careful not to get into a row with them, if it can be avoided."
 "I's off, Mars' Jim! I ain't hungry a bit!"
 "No! no! You needn't be in such a hurry. There's time enough for you to get your dinner, if you're quick about it. But after you get into the saddle, don't let the grass grow under your feet!"
 "I'll be dah mose as soon as you be. See 'f I don't!"
 "No. You're to come back to the ranch here."
 "Ain't I goin' to be in it?" cried Little Shoo-fly, in keen disappointment.
 "It won't do to leave all the chores upon father," said Mars' Jim. "Don't you see that I'm taking all the men off the place?"
 "Yes!" said Little Shoo-fly, ruefully. "Dey's all goin' to be in it 'cep' me!"

There was no time to argue this point. Mars' Jim was already in the saddle; most of his men were waiting the word of command; and the last laggards were fast falling into position.
 Mars' Jim turned for a last look at the woman whose smile was to carry him through the impending crisis.
 Mother Reardon had followed Lina into the house and taken her in her arms.
 "My dearest dear!" she had murmured, kissing her with a mother's love.
 Lina had thrown her arms about the old lady's neck, with a spasmodic hug; but without words. Her heart was too full for expression, and there was really no need of it.
 They fully understood each other. Mars' Jim was the link between them. One loved him with the unswerving devotion of a mother, and one with the wild ecstasy of a first all-engrossing passion.
 The older woman wept silently, but the younger was convulsed with sobs.
 "Oh! he is going into such dreadful danger!" she presently burst forth. "Tell him—tell him— Oh, it will break my heart! Mother! mother! mother!"
 "Hush! hush!" said the other, soothingly. "I reckon it won't be so bad. Jim's got the pluck of a young lion; and you may believe that that Caldor fellow will think twice before he tries to tackle him!"
 "Oh! you dear creature!" cried the girl, rewarding this praise of her lover with renewed hugging and kisses, while she smiled through her tears.
 But then she thought she was showing her heart too freely before there was a definite understanding between her and Mars' Jim; and she slipped out of Mrs. Reardon's arms, and ran to her own room.
 There she removed the traces of tears from her eyes, and drawing aside the white curtain, looked out, to see if she could get a glimpse of her lover at the head of his men.
 Mars' Jim saw her, and lifted his hat.
 It was in her heart to throw a kiss to him; but the eyes of two-score men were on her, and overcome with embarrassment, she quickly dropped the curtain before her crimson face!
 "Forward!" shouted Mars' Jim.
 And the cavalcade dashed away, leaving Little Shoo-fly sitting idly in the saddle and gazing after them with envy.
 Had he guessed the adventures that were to fall to his share, he would not have exchanged places with the best man of the party!
 "Come in hyeah an' git yer dinneh!" called mammy.
 That roused him to the duty that he was leaving unfulfilled.
 "Hyeah I is!" he cried, springing into the kitchen. "Now stan' aroun'; fur I hain't got no time to waste!"
 "Look a-hyeh, young felleh!" retorted his mother, "don't you put on so many airs! Mars' Jim hisse'f couldn't play de boss wid you! One would tink dat you run de place!"
 Little Shoo-fly took his place at the table quite crestfallen.
 "It only 'quires de ole mammy to take de buckram out o' you!" chuckled his mother, as she heaped his plate with smoking meat and vegetables. "It's a mons'us pity, dough, dat dah ain't dem as is mo'e desahvin' to sp'il dis good grub!"
 Little Shoo-fly fell to with a vigor which showed that, whatever his deserts, there could be no debate as to his appetite.
 While knife and fork, and occasionally hands, were engaged in this furious rivalry, Lina came upon the scene of action.
 "Why, Clem! what are you doing here?" she asked.
 "Mars' Jim wouldn't take me 'long!" was the reply, in a most lugubrious voice.
 "Why not?"
 "He said I was to go whah de herd is, an' hab Dorn send a lot mo' o' de men up to de new feedin'-groun'."
 "Well, I'm sure that's a very responsible errand."
 "Oh, yes! it's 'sponsible 'nough!"
 "What's the matter with you, then?"
 "He ain't goin' fur to let me be at de doin's! I's got to come back hyeah to do de chores wid de ole marse."
 Lina started with a sudden thought.
 "You are to go to the herd, and then come back here?"
 "Yes, missy."
 The girl left the kitchen abruptly without further words.
 "He said that I could go, with Clem for my escort, if—if I was a Western girl! I'll show

him that an Eastern girl can be all that a Western one is, and more too!"

She did not know that Mars' Jim had not fully expressed himself when he said that Little Shoo-fly should be her escort. He had intended to send a trustworthy man in their company, Little Shoo-fly's position being a rather honorary one.

She did not tell any one what she intended to do, fearing that Mrs. Reardon, with the caution which younger people despise, would try to dissuade her.

But a few minutes later, when Little Shoo-fly cleared the grove which surrounded the ranch-house, he was surprised to find himself joined by "Missy Lina."

"Whah's you goin', Missy?" he asked.

"With you," was the quiet reply.

"Is you?" cried the youngster, opening his eyes to their widest extent with surprise and delight. "Dat's hunk! Hooray! But we's got to ride like de wind."

"You lead the way, and I'll see that you are not delayed!"

And they sped away over the prairie, laughing gayly with exhilaration at the rapid motion. Now—when—were they to return?

CHAPTER VI.

A RACE FOR A RANCH-SITE.

"THERE they go, boss!"

"With a good start, too," replied Mars' Jim.

They had reached the open prairie.

Far ahead of them they could see their rivals scampering off toward the distant horizon.

"Bamley, they'll never let us pass them without a fight for it, even if we've got the legs and bottom to do it."

"No more they would," assented the herder addressed.

"We'll let them open the ball; and that will clear us of blame, anyway."

"Boss, I know a trick worth two of that."

"What is it?"

"What we want is the land, without fightin', ef we kin git it?"

"Of course."

"It will stand us in hand, then, to git round them fellers without passin' close by 'em."

"If we could. But how? They are directly in our line."

"Suppose we take the south pass?"

"We could never get through there."

"Yes we kin. There's been a land-slide that has filled in the only absolutely impassable break. We may have to do some tall scratchin'; but we kin make it, an' I'll bet money on it."

"Bamley, if we should miss it, it will be all day with us!"

"I know that."

"And yet you feel so confident that you advise me to take the risk?"

"Yes, I do."

"It's a shorter way, if we can only get through the pass."

"If we git on the ground fu'st, we're gein' to bluff them fellers. But if we try to pass 'em in a narrow gulch, thar'll be trouble; an' don't you furgit it!"

"That's the ugly feature of it. I don't want to fight if I can secure my rights without it."

"Is it the south pass, then?"

"Yes. I'll trust to your judgment."

"We'll take the left of yonder motte after they've got out o' sight; an' when they see us ag'in we'll be four miles out o' line, so's it'll be too late fur 'em to try to cut in ahead of us."

This suggestion was acted upon.

"Boys," cried George Caldor, when he again caught sight of his rivals, "they've concluded to risk the south pass."

"They're welcome to that," cried one of his men. "If they don't git stalled, I lose my guess!"

"Are you sure it is impassable?" asked Caldor, anxiously.

"I was routin' around thar two weeks ago; an' the devil himself couldn't jump the big break."

"Then we're solid!"

This divergence of course separated the two parties further and further from each other. They struck the foot-hills very nearly at the same time, but several miles apart.

Our friends had chosen a gulch of the most rugged description. Crags towered and chasms yawned on every side, while they made their way among jagged boulders and along seamed ledges.

Here a horse lost his footing, his rider considering himself lucky if he was cast clear of the beast, and not rolled upon; and both rose bruised and bleeding.

There an animal balked, and stood trembling and obstinate.

All made their way with the utmost difficulty and risk over as torturous and ragged a path as was ever attempted.

But in the end they cleared every difficulty, and stood once more on traversable ground.

"Hurrah!" shouted Mars' Jim, swinging his hat above his head.

"Hooray!" responded his men, lustily.

"How do we stand, boys?"

"Two disabled hosses, an' one man purty bad hurt," replied Bamley.

"Who is he?"

"Galloway."

"There was some one left to look after him?"

"Yes, Bushy Bill. He said as his hoss was used up, he couldn't be o' no good to us; so he'd see to Galloway, an' fetch him up easy."

"I won't forget either of them. Forward, men! It has cost a great deal of time to get through there."

He looked at his watch and consulted Bamley, in whose judgment he had great confidence.

"We're goin' to make it, boss," said the old herder, "unless George Caldor has got better stock under him than I believe he has."

"But we haven't any time to spare."

"Not much! It'll be a tight squeak, the best we kin do."

"Boys, you hear that?"

"We'll make it, Cap!"

"Away, then!"

And away they scampered once more.

Now they rode with compressed lips and a look of indomitable resolve.

By that set expression it was manifest that if they found their rivals on the spot before them, there would be a desperate struggle for the mastery.

With their heads thrust forward in a direct line with their necks, their eyes rolling, their nostrils distended, and foam flinging in snowy flecks from their mouths, the faithful animals they bestrode skimmed the prairie like birds on the wing.

Time passed; the prairie changed to mountain pass, and mountain pass returned to prairie. Then came gently-rolling hills, threaded by a silver lace-work of streams, into which their horses leaped, to scramble up the crumbling bank, and on again without pause.

The sun of that long afternoon was not down when, dabbled with mud and reeking with sweat, they bore their masters into a perfect paradise of pasture lands.

"See! see!" cried Mars' Jim, looking eagerly away to the northward.

A single horseman was visible, urging his beast to the utmost.

"It is George Caldor himself!" responded Bamley.

"Yes. He has distanced his whole party."

"He means to git his foot on the ground, an' have us oust him."

"That's his game, evidently."

"See! thar comes another one!"

"And just clearing that hill are two more!"

"They have strung out so's to put their best foot foremost, fur a fact."

"Boys, are we going to let them walk into that pasture under our very noses?"

"Not much, we ain't!"

The response went up from a score of throats, accompanied in most cases with more or less embellishment in the way of profanity.

"One last strain, then! Away! away!"

"Ya-a-a-ah!" yelled Mars' Jim's crowd.

The shout was borne afar on the clear mountain air.

George Caldor turned his head and glared at his enemies.

"Curse them! curse them!" he grated between his teeth.

His eyes were blood-shot, his face livid.

"To be beaten in this, too!" he fairly howled.

"On! on! or I'll tear the heart out of you!"

Again and again, with savage fury, he plunged the rowels of his cruel Mexican spurs into his horse's flanks, already streaming with blood.

The animal responded feebly, with a last rousing of his flagging energies.

It was plain that he was dead beat, and if he survived this terrific ride, he would never be worth anything again.

"Bamley!" cried Mars' Jim, "he's goin' to beat us, in spite of our teeth! I'd give a thousand dollars rather than see him put his foot on that land first!"

"He ain't across that creek yet!" replied Bamley, who was less than a length behind his employer.

"Neither are we!" groaned Mars' Jim.

"Do you see that broken willow?"

"With a little opening to the right of it—about a rod?"

"That's it! Strike that spot, and you can jump it from bank to bank. He'd be in luck if he could do the same whar he is."

"He'll try it—you may depend on that!"

"I only hope he will!"

"Follow, boys!" shouted Mars' Jim, turning in his saddle and waving his hand to his men.

They responded with a wild cheer, finishing with a yell of defiance at their adversaries.

George Caldor's followers responded with a shout of derision. They saw that their man was ahead.

Caldor reached the bank first, and with spur and voice forced his horse to take the leap. His eye told him that he could not hope to reach the other side in safety; but he resolved that his horse should carry him as far as possible, if he was thrown the rest of the way.

They reached mid-stream; and there the horse and rider went out of sight with a tremendous splash.

Bamley drew rein just sufficiently to fetch himself directly behind his employer; and an instant later they sailed over the boundary in quick succession, soon followed by their comrades.

Such a cheer as went up the instant Mars' Jim's horse struck the coveted territory with his hoof!

Then his men gathered about him with smiles of congratulation.

"Boys!" he cried, "we owe this to Clem. Three cheers for Little Shoo-fly! Hip! hip!"

"Hooray!"

"Hip! hip!"

"Hooray!"

"Hip! hip!"

"HOORAY! YA-A-A-A-AH!"

While the victors were paying this tribute to our little hero, George Caldor was borne down by the swift current, to be fished out on the other side by his own men.

His horse had succumbed. With the effort of that last leap he burst his gallant heart—worthy to fail in the service of a better master!—and the stream was crimsoned with the blood that gushed from his nostrils.

It is not an easy thing to acknowledge defeat; but a judicious friend may help one over the awkward necessity.

George Caldor had such a henchman in one Ad Selman.

"Boss," he said, "the jig's up. We might as well cave easy, an' lay fur 'em another time. They're too many fur us. I hate to crawfish as bad as the next man; but common-sense is a jewel, an' that's so!"

"I'm not fool enough to try to fight twice our number, and with the law against us!" said Caldor, roughly. "Come, men! pull out of this!"

And they rode away.

If George Caldor had known what he was going to, he would have left the spot in far better humor.

Had Mars' Jim known, he would have thought his victory dearly bought!

CHAPTER VII.

LOST!

THE scamper over the sun-lit prairie was to Lina most exhilarating fun, to begin with; but long before she reached her destination the monotony of ever-recurring swells, dotted with mottes of timber that looked all alike, depressed her spirits; and she was forced to admit to herself that she was tired.

Clem, on the other hand, though he had made the distance once before that day, seemed as fresh as a daisy.

"I suppose it's because I am not a Western girl!" she reflected, making a pretty mouth at recollection of Mars' Jim's unlucky speech. "But I won't let even Clem know that I feel it, if it kills me!"

But when they came in sight of the herd, all sense of weariness disappeared before the excitement of wonder and admiration with which she was inspired by the seemingly endless number of cattle. As far as the eye could reach in every direction, the vast plain fairly swarmed with them. Some were grazing quietly; some were lying down. Here a couple of belligerent old bulls were pawing the earth and charging each other with heads down and eyes rolling. Yonder a great wing of the herd was moving restlessly, like a body of cavalry, checked in its incipient stampede by a cowboy riding at full speed, and employing a great deal of profanity.

"Let me stay here on this knoll, Clem, while you go and deliver your message, said Lina.

"I don't care to go among those rough fellows. But don't stay long."

"I's dah an' back in no time, missy. Don't you worry."

While Lina dismounted and walked about with her arm linked through her bridle-rein, Little Shoo-fly rode toward a motte above which rose a pillar of smoke far into the sky.

The excitement caused by his announcement was soon apparent. Two horsemen issued from the clump of trees, to gallop furiously in opposite directions, skirting the herd.

As they passed a herder, a hasty word was exchanged without pause, and the man spoken to abandoned his post and galloped toward headquarters.

When this influx of men had ceased, a body of not less than a score issued from the motte, riding northward at a swinging gallop, between Lina and the herd.

They swung their hats and cheered her as they passed; and she waved her handkerchief in return.

Clem came forth with them, and branching off, rode up to Lina.

"Tell ye what it is, Missy Lina!" he cried, breathlessly. "Ef de boys cotch dat Caldor gang cuttin' up rusty wid Mars' Jim, dah'll be music! Golly!"

And he wagged his head after the manner of the small boy in such cases.

"What a bloodthirsty set you all are, Clem! I believe you are glad there is a likelihood of trouble."

"Glad? I'd be glad ef I was dah! Ki! won't dah be gran' times ef deh git at it?"

Despairing of making any impression on this young savage, Lina said:

"Meanwhile, the afternoon is more than half gone. We shall be overtaken by night. Come! not another minute to waste!"

"Ye needn't be skeered, Missy Lina. We's gwine to hab a moon as big as a cart-wheel to-night."

"But we mustn't be out after nightfall. What will uncle and aunt say? They don't even know that I have gone with you."

Little Shoo-fly leaped from the saddle, and offered his knee as a mounting-block; and with light spring Lina was in her seat.

Within an hour a change occurred for which Little Shoo-fly had made no calculation. The sky became overcast.

Then Lina asked, apprehensively:

"Clem, are you sure you can keep our direction?"

"Oh yes, missy! Dat's as easy as rollin' off'n a log!"

"But you can go no longer by the sun."

"All de same, we kin feel de wind! Hyuh! hyuh! hyuh!"

And he laughed gleefully at his shrewdness. But there was just where he fooled himself.

After rising out of the West, the wind veered round until before sunset it had made a half-circuit of the heavens, and was blowing almost directly back where it came from.

The result was that Little Shoo-fly traveled in a circle, and the gloom of falling night found him not five miles from where he had started, and without the faintest idea of where he was.

"Clem, we are certainly lost!" cried Lina.

"Oh, no we ain't missy!" he protested, stoutly. "You know it was so late when we started back dat we hain't had time to git home, no-how. You said so yerself!"

"But it is getting dark! In half an hour we sha'n't be able to see our hands before our faces!"

"But in half an hour we'll be all hunk. Don't ye see dat 'ah motte ober yandeh?"

"Yes! yes!"

"Well, afteh we pass dat, you kin see de trees dat's aroun' de ranch. Dat's de woods wha' Mars' Caldor an' his gang chased me."

But alas for his prophecy! After they passed the motte indicated, he was forced to admit that he had mistaken it for another; and the ranch lay still on beyond, just out of sight.

So the night fell, and they stood close together, trembling, and asking each other what was to be done.

Lina was frightened by the chill, damp wind and the yelping of the coyotes.

Little Shoo-fly was not a little alarmed, but he tried to keep up a show of bravery.

"Tell you what it is, missy," he said. "We's fixed fur de night—dat's sure!"

"For the night? Oh! we can't stay out here! We shall be devoured by wild beasts. Don't you hear them?"

"Dat's only de coyotes. Dey won't hurt ye. An' we kin keep 'em off by buildin' a fiah."

"To guide Indians to us, or something equally

terrible! Oh! Clem, what shall we do? what shall we do? How foolish of me to go off like this without letting any one know!"

But repining availed nothing. They must make the best of the situation.

Their horses were weary, and Lina herself was so exhausted that she could hardly keep her saddle.

At last she consented to dismount, finding herself cramped and stiff as she moved about.

Little Shoo-fly tethered the horses and built a fire.

For a time the girl crouched near it, peering around into the night with terror. But she was thoroughly fagged out and weak with hunger; and Little Shoo-fly finally persuaded her to lie down, with her saddle for a pillow.

Every once in a while she would start up in alarm, but being reassured, lay down again. So, presently, she fell into an exhausted sleep.

Little Shoo-fly began to nod; for he had been up and active since long before daylight.

So they were not startled by a dull, rumbling sound that seemed to quiver in the air.

It swelled louder and louder, until it resembled the continuous roar of falling water.

The very earth began to tremble. Then the sleeping girl started up and leaped to her feet with a shriek of terror.

"Clem! Clem! What is about to happen? It is an earthquake! Oh, what shall we do?"

Thus startled out of sleep, Little Shoo-fly scrambled to his feet, his distended eyes glistening in the fire-light.

"What's dat? What's dat?"

"Don't you hear it? I thought it was thunder. But see! the sky is perfectly clear. And can't you feel the earth shake?"

It was true. The wind had silently swept the sky while they slept, and a full moon was flooding the earth with silver light.

It revealed something more terrible than an earthquake to Little Shoo-fly.

"Thunder!" he cried. "Dat ain't thunder! Look dah, Missy Lina! We's done gone, fur sure!"

He pointed wildly toward the west.

Lina looked and saw a dark line, like a black cloud, hugging close to the ground as it swept toward them.

"What is it?" she cried.

"It's de cattle! Dey's stampeded! Dey'll tramp us out so dat you can't find a grease-spot! Oh! Lo'd sabb dis po' sinneh!"

"The cattle? Then we can't stay here. We shall be trampled to death. We must fly. Clem! oh, Clem! the horses!"

Her shrill cry was caused by seeing the horses rear, so as to tear up the lariat-pins, and then make off like the wind.

"Dat settles it!" cried Little Shoo-fly, despondently.

"What are we to do? What are we to do?" cried the terrified girl, clinging to him.

"Dah ain't nuffin' dat we kin do only to pray."

"Pray! But we shall be crushed by those cruel hoofs! Let us run for shelter somewhere!"

She essayed to drag him away with her; but Little Shoo-fly hung back.

And that black death bore down upon them in its brute pitilessness!

CHAPTER VIII.

A MARE'S NEST.

"BAMLEY, I don't like the way that fellow has gone off."

"Waal, boss, to tell ye the truth, I don't nuther."

"What do you think about it?"

"He's sot to git square, somehow."

"What can he do?"

"Suppose he takes it into his head to try his hand at stampedin'?"

"That's just what has occurred to me! I am sorry that I had Little Shoo-fly go for the men. We don't want them here; and we may need them there before the night is over."

"That's so."

"What can we do about it?"

"Foller 'im up?"

"Our stock is about played out."

"An' the men dead beat."

"Suppose we send a couple of scouts out? And if they find that he goes into camp, we needn't trouble ourselves."

"That ain't sich a bad idee. I'll go myself."

"I wish you would, Bamley. And take Herrick with you. If you make up your mind that they are really going there, send him back to us, but keep on yourself, and try to cut in ahead of them and warn the boys."

The faithful fellow, who was used to all sorts of privation, did not think of being discontent

at what was asked of him, but entered upon his task with zeal.

While the horses were being rubbed down for them, the scouts ate a hasty meal of jerked meat, washed down with water from the creek, and then sprung into the saddle.

Clouds obscured the sky; and the gloom covering their movements, the scouts at once entered upon the trail of George Caldor and his men.

Unable to distinguish the actual trail, they took the direction which they must follow, and were not long in coming upon their camp-fires.

"They've tied up in a pocket," observed Herrick.

"Yes," answered Bamley. "An' I know it like a book. Thar's no way out but through the front door. Ef we've got 'em in thar, we've got 'em under our thumb. But we can't take our hosses in thar without their spottin' us."

They therefore dismounted, and crept forward on hands and knees.

The place Caldor had selected was, as has been said, a pocket, with a narrow gulch leading into it.

Through this opening several camp-fires could be seen in the distance, their light now and then intercepted by a passing figure.

But the fires were too far in the pocket for one on the outside to identify the persons, as the undergrowth prevented him from forming an estimate of their number.

"It may be another crowd," said Bamley.

"We want to make sure o' that."

"All I ask is to git my peepers on one o' George Caldor's gang," said Herrick. "I know 'em to a man."

"Go slow! They may have pickets out; an' we don't want to give ourselves away."

"That's so. It might put the idee into their heads, ef it ain't thar now."

They crept forward with every precaution, and the event proved the wisdom of their course.

At the very mouth of the ravine Bamley suddenly put a detaining hand on Herrick's wrist.

Directly in their path they discovered a sentinel, seated with a carbine across his knees.

It was impossible to pass him without almost brushing against him.

Bamley began to "crawfish," and Herrick followed him in a silent retreat.

When they were at a safe distance, the former put his lips to the latter's ear, and whispered:

"Let us agree what is to be done."

"Thar's no use in tryin' to slip by him," responded Herrick, using the same precaution.

"Not while he's alive and awake."

"But we can capture him."

"That won't do. Ef they ain't up to mischief, we don't want to let on that we're a-watchin' of 'em."

"But ef we let it go as it is, we may wake up an' find ourselves watchin' a mare's nest, while Caldor an' his gang is sailin' gayly into them cattle!"

"We ain't doin' nothin' o' that kind, you bet! Ef we have to down him, why, down he goes. But suppose you sly up an' look him over? You say you've sized 'em all up."

"Pard, that's jest what I'll do; an' ef it's one o' Caldor's galoots, you bet I kin place him!"

Herrick once more crept forward, so cautiously that the slight noise he unavoidably made was covered by the whispering of the wind through the tree-tops.

Getting quite close to the sentinel, he rose so as to bring his profile in a line with one of the fires, and so recognized him.

"Well?" whispered Bamley, the moment he made his reappearance.

"We're all right. It's Patsy Magoon."

"Then all we've got to do is to guard this doorway; an' they can't change their minds to-night without our knowing it."

"That's about the size of it."

"It won't take but one to do that. You go back an' make the boss easy, an' I'll take care o' Mr. Caldor. Ef thar's any trouble during the night, you'll hyar from me."

Herrick went back with this message, and Bamley settled himself for an all-night watch.

"That gives us a good night's sleep," said Mars' Jim, when he was informed of the apparent state of things. "But I wonder why he went into such a place. He couldn't have feared that we would attack him."

Had he only known!

George Caldor had not accepted his defeat so easily.

The moment he turned away he addressed his henchman:

"Ad, this thing don't rest so!"

"It wouldn't ef I was in your shoes."

"What can be done? The land is lost. It

might be in the courts ten years, while he continued to get the substance off of it."

"Strike him on the other hip."

"Eh?"

"He's knocked you out of the land. Suppose you knock him out o' some of his stock?"

"By Jove!"

"What's sass fur the goose is sass fur the gander. That's what I say."

"But how can we do it?"

"With so many men up hyar, he must be short-handed down yonder."

"That's so. But then, we can't attack them."

"No more we kin. But suppose their cattle happened to be stampeded to-night? That would be hard luck, wouldn't it?"

And Selman laughed.

"But it wouldn't be so funny if I had to pay for the damages afterward!" objected Caldor. "Remember, I've got something that the law can get hold of."

"But suppose we was fifty miles away when the thing happened?"

"Show up, Selman. What are you trying to get at?"

And then was laid the plot which was afterward carried out.

"By Jove! it is just the thing!" cried Caldor, when Selman had detailed his scheme. "Of course they will be suspicious, and will look after us. And they will fall into the trap as neatly as one could wish."

They rode forward to the pocket described above, where only a handful of men were left, the rest riding on toward the south.

So Bamley was keeping watch over a mare's nest, after all; and Mars' Jim was sleeping in false security.

And far to the south was taking place that night a scene that would have brought his heart into his mouth, and turned his blood to ice!

He dreamed of Lina—not happy, with the love-light beaming in her eyes, but white with terror, stretching out her arms to him to save her from some danger that he could not see.

He woke, dripping with perspiration and trembling from head to foot, with her despairing cry yet ringing in his ears, blended with the mocking laugh of George Caldor!

CHAPTER IX.

MARS' JIM'S OATH.

"MAMMY, what's become of Miss Lina?"

"Deed, Marse Reardon, I dunno."

"I haven't seen her since dinner-time."

"No mo' has I."

"Come to think— No, she wasn't at the table at all. Hasn't she been in for a bite since?"

"No, sah."

"Mother, do you know where Lina is?"

"I reckon she ought to be in her room," said Mrs. Reardon, recalling with a tender smile the cause the girl had for wishing solitude. "Perhaps you'd better not disturb her, father."

"Nonsense! I tell you what it is, mother: I've got so used to having her at my elbow when I take a run around the place that I feel lost without her. I say! did you notice anything between her and our vagabond Jim?"

"Oh! not vagabond, father!" protested maternal pride.

"Confound him! I'm afraid he's going to run away with her! I'd show him a thing or two, though, if I was thirty years younger, and—"

"Had me off your hands!" laughed mother Reardon, as he stammered somewhat at a loss how to put it gracefully. "Oh! speak out! I'm not a bit jealous; because you haven't a ghost of a show against Jim."

"We'll see about that!"

And father Reardon strode to Lina's door, and pounding a rousing summons on it, cried:

"Wide awake in thar! It's time to make our regular rounds!"

There was no answer; and the door being opened, the room was found to be empty.

Then a general inquiry was made, until one of the maids said:

"If you please, sir, she went out to ride with Clem."

"What's that? Why Shoo-fly was sent to the herd, thirty miles away."

"I was comin' in from the spring-house, sir, and I seen her ride out and join Clem. Then he asked her whar she was goin', and she said with him. And then they rode away as fast as they could."

"Good heavens!" cried the old man. "Why, the child is crazy! Mother, did you know anything about this?"

"Not a word. Oh, Ned! you mustn't let harm come to her! Jim has set his heart on her, and she on him, I know!"

"Jim!" shouted the old man. "Who cares anything about Jim! Fetch my pistols, while I saddle the best horse that those scoundrels have left."

He ran off, growling his expectation not to find one fit to be a cart-horse.

A few minutes later he was galloping furiously in the direction Little Shoo-fly and Lina had taken earlier in the day. His aim was to meet them on their return before night-fall, if they were delayed so long, as was probable.

He left his wife wringing her hands in tearful helplessness, and the whole business of the ranch at a stand-still with anxiety on behalf of "Missy Lina."

He himself was scarcely less moved than the women.

"Dear old Jim!" he muttered to himself, "he deserves her; but I wouldn't say the same of any other man that ever stood in shoe-leather! But he'll never forgive me if anything happens! Pshaw! what can happen? Little Shoo-fly is as knowing as most men, if he is a rattle-brain. Jim wouldn't have sent him, if he hadn't been sure that he knew the way."

But the sky became overcast, so that but for his familiarity with the country he might have lost his way; and in despair he saw the night closing in about him, and nothing yet seen of Lina or Little Shoo-fly.

The darkness compelled a halt; but soon the sky cleared, and he resumed his way.

He was within ten miles of where he expected to find the herd, when a horse came tearing toward him riderless, and without saddle or bridle, but dragging a tethering pin, at the risk of broken legs or possibly a broken neck.

The runaway came up to him quite docilely upon being called, and he discovered that it was one of his own, and the sweat-marks on its back showed that it had worn a lady's saddle.

That discovery drove him wild with fear, and without stopping to so much as tether the beast, he tore forward to learn what had become of its rider.

He soon encountered a herd of stampeding cattle, and then his distress knew no bounds.

"She is dead! dead!" he cried, aloud, in his despair—"trampled out of all human semblance! Poor Jim! poor boy!"

He was surprised to find no herders striving to stem the mad-rushing tide of the brutes. Even when he had evaded the cattle and gone on, he could find no one, alive or dead. Nor was there any trace of Lina and Little Shoo-fly.

Ah! what is that? A dark object lying on the open prairie!

He urged his horse toward it, all his soul shrinking with dread!

It was a dead horse, its body mangled to a jelly.

One hind-foot was drawn forward by entanglement in the tether. The beast had been thrown and then trampled to death.

The old man choked with sobs, and tears ran down his beard. This was conclusive evidence that the girl to whom he looked to add strength to Jim's manhood and peace to his own old age had been overwhelmed by the stampeding cattle. But another and terrible discovery awaited him. Further on he found a man lying with his ghastly face to the moonlight, stark and rigid in death.

A bullet having penetrated an eye-socket showed how he had met his fate.

Mr. Reardon wiped away the blood, expecting to identify one of his son's men; but he recognized another.

"Abe Hardy! One of Caldor's men! There has been treachery here. While Jim was off to protect his claim, they have come here and struck him in the back."

With this misunderstanding, he turned his horse northward, sadly wondering how he could find words to tell a tale like this to his unfortunate boy.

He reached his destination some time before daylight, and woke the sleeping camp.

"Good heavens, father! you here? What can be the matter? Speak quickly!" cried his son, startled by his appearance.

"Try to be a man, Jim!" exclaimed his father, wringing his hand.

"What is it? What is it?" asked Mars' Jim, huskily. "The ranch has not—"

"We're all right at home, but—but—"

"Well," said Mars' Jim, the color returning to his face and his breath coming freer, "it can't be so bad, then, father. Come! cheer up. Do you know? for just one moment I feared that that devil had taken his revenge on me where he could hurt me most. Anything will

be cheerful news, now that I know you are all right at home."

And he smiled, in the reaction after that sharp twinge of anguish.

"Jim! Jim! for God's sake, don't talk that way!" cried the old gentleman. "You don't know what you're saying. Did you know that Lina went with Clem?"

"Lina? Clem? Went where?"

Once more the blood fled cheek and lips.

"To see the herd, Jim."

"Good God!"

He stood as if smitten by lightning, ghastly pale and quivering in every limb.

"Oh, but it's all right!" he said, with a sudden change of manner, wiping the icy sweat from his forehead. "Shoo-fly is a sharp little chap, you know. And he knows the way like a book. Boys, put every horse under saddle quicker than you ever did in all your lives before! You couldn't lose him. I'll bet he's got back since you started away from home. We'll find him there all right, mark my word for it. Don't stop for anything, but just pull things together any way. The thing is to get out of here as soon as possible. But how in the world did—"

He was on the point of asking how they had come to let her go; but his generous nature checked him. If some terrible calamity actually befell them all, the old folks must not feel that he reproached them in any degree.

"Jim," said the old man, shrinking more and more from the disclosure of the terrible truth, as he saw how deeply his son was affected, "they haven't got back."

"Oh, well! they may have seen that they would be overtaken by night, and so wisely concluded to stay with the boys until morning. You remember, it clouded over; and Shoo-fly may have been sharp enough not to start under such circumstances."

"Oh, Jim! Jim!" sighed the father, "I have hardly courage to tell you!"

Now a terrible change came over Mars' Jim. All the false hopes with which he had been trying to delude himself were swept away.

"What is it?" he shouted, seizing his father by the shoulders. "Speak! Do you know that you are wringing my heart— For God's sake, tell me! What has happened to her? Is she dead? Have you seen her?"

Like the lightning-stroke had come his passion. As abruptly he broke down. He stood wringing his hands, as one awaiting his death-blow.

"We missed her about the middle of the afternoon—"

"Is she dead?"

"Have patience, Jim! God knows I cannot tell you!"

Mars' Jim dropped his face in his hands.

"Go on! go on!" he said, brokenly.

"I learned that she had gone with Clem, without our knowledge."

"My God! my God! my careless words led her into it! I told her that she might go under Clem's escort. I never dreamed of letting her go alone with him. I intended to send Bamley with them—the most reliable man I have. Then in the excitement of having to compete with Caldor, I forgot what we had talked about."

"I found no trace of them until I had almost reached the grazing ground, when I was met by Kate. She was dragging a lariat-pin, and was without saddle or bridle. So they must have stopped for the night. A little further on I encountered the herd stampeded."

"What?" cried Mars' Jim, with a sharp twinge of pain and terror.

"Flanking them, I found another horse that had been thrown and trampled to death."

"My God! my God!"

Mars' Jim was now wringing his clammy hands.

"Where were the boys all this time?" he asked, piteously.

"I don't know. I couldn't find a trace of them. But, Jim, I found something else."

"What was that?"

"A dead man. He had been shot."

"One of the boys? Shot? How could that be?"

"It wasn't one of our boys. It was one of George Caldor's. It was Abe Hardy."

"Abe Hardy? Why, he is within four miles of us, now. Boys, wasn't Abe Hardy with Caldor last night?"

"Yes, he was," replied one of the men; and others corroborated the statement.

"I could not be mistaken. It was in the broad moonlight. I know it was Hardy."

"Then they must have given Bamley the slip somehow. And this is Caldor's revenge! Failing to get possession of the land, he has stampeded my cattle—and caused her death!"

Now a terrible look came into his face. He dropped upon one knee, and extended his hand toward heaven.

"Hear me swear, Almighty God!" he cried. "If harm has come to her through his means, I will drain his heart, drop by drop, and feed it to my dogs!"

Then with a bound he sprung up.

"To horse! to horse!" he cried.

In an instant they were in the saddle, and sweeping southward.

There was no time to stop to see whether Bambley was yet on guard. His one thought was to get to his darling, dead or alive. When he had found her, there would be time to look up George Caldor.

CHAPTER X. THE STAMPEDE.

"Now, boys, if any of you are at all squeamish about this thing, now is your time to back out," said George Caldor.

"Cap, we ain't o' the backin'-out stripe," replied one of his men.

"I don't ask any man to serve me against his will; but if he goes in with me I want him to stand by me when the pinch comes."

"You lead on, boss; an' you bet you'll find us thar, every time!"

"There's going to be some ugly work; I won't hide that from you."

"We've done it before!"

"Hanging work, if we're caught. For we may have to knock some of those fellows out."

"That's all right."

"I don't like to resort to extreme measures where it can be helped; but if we are spotted by any of their men, we don't want to let them get away to blow on us."

"We'll look out fur that. If a galoot's a-standin' round in the way, it's his misfortune."

"You are all agreed?"

"To a man!"

"Then forward!"

Through the black night they made their way like birds of evil omen, until they came to where Mars' Jim's vast herd rested quietly on the plain.

"What we want first, is an hour's rest for our horses," said Caldor. "Meanwhile, Selman, you and I will put in the time making a reconnaissance."

By this means they satisfied themselves that the herd was very scantily guarded.

"A whoop-la, and they are off," said Selman.

"But it strikes me that there are signs of the clouds breaking away," observed George Caldor.

"So much the worse for us; there's a full moon to-night."

"We'll have to put the boys *en masque*. It's an ugly thing to have to drop any of those fellows in cold blood!"

Albeit a man of violent passions, George Caldor was not entirely destitute of humanity.

"We can tear a blanket up, an' disguise 'em so that their mothers wouldn't know 'em," said Selman.

"That's just what we will do."

This plan was carried out; and soon, disguised in this rude way, the men were ready for action.

"Now, boys," was their leader's last word, "you can yell all you like, but let me do all the talking. We don't want any voices recognized. And above all, if any of our fellows get knocked out of the saddle they mustn't be left on the ground. If it calls for a pitched battle to do it, all of our disabled men must be got away."

The men scattered in opposite directions, so as to strike the herd at different points, and then waited for the discharge of a pistol, which was the signal agreed upon for making a break for the cattle.

The sky was just beginning to clear in the East as George Caldor fired his revolver into the air.

Then there was a swift rush of horses.

A moment, and yells burst from a score of throats, as they dashed in among the resting cattle.

Then followed snorting and bellowing in terror. The vast herd started to its feet, and began to swarm like a nest of disturbed ants.

For a time all was the wildest confusion. Bodies of frightened beasts, pouring in opposite directions, met in terrific collision, breaking each other's ranks, and intermingling so as to be brought to a standstill, only to start again until turned aside by some countercurrent.

In these encounters many were gored; some were thrown down and trampled to death.

Whichever way they turned they seemed to meet a horseman dashing back and forth, yell-

ing like a drunken Comanche, and firing his revolvers into the air.

But gradually the conflicting currents took a general direction; and the mighty horde of brutes swept over the plain like the sea through a crevasse.

Faithfully Mars' Jim's men fought this assault, at first thinking that it was the work of thieving savages.

But the wind swept the sky, and the full moon showed them men of their own race.

By their blanket masks they were easily distinguished, though unrecognizable.

Then Phil Dorn shouted:

"A hundred dollars to a cent, it's that infernal Caldor gang! Charge 'em, boys, an' make a capture of you kin!"

There was only one of his men near enough to hear him; but the others needed no prompting. Though outnumbered, they charged their enemies with the indomitable pluck which has made the cowboy the terror of the West.

It was hopeless to try to stop the stampede while a score of yelling demons were goading the beasts to madness. But they could have revenge first, and then see what could be done in the way of re-collecting the herd in the morning.

A spirited battle ensued, which was not fought out until the cattle were far out of sight and hearing, and with half of his men dead or dying and nearly all the rest more or less severely wounded, Phil Dorn was obliged to call them off.

But before he sounded the retreat he had one purpose to accomplish.

"My bully boys!" he muttered between his set teeth, "I don't leave you, ye onderstand, until I'm fixed to report to the boss who he has to thank fur this pretty trick!"

And selecting one who appeared to be a leader, he made his way to him and engaged him in single combat.

Selecting the old Californian mode of encounter by hurling one horse against another, Dorn spurred his animal into a terrific collision with that of his enemy; and while the other struggled to keep his horse on his feet and maintain his seat in the saddle, he made a snatch at his mask, and succeeded in tearing it from his face.

"Ad Selman!" he shouted. "I know you and your master!"

Then he wheeled and dashed away.

"After them!" yelled Selman, cursing his luck. "Not a man who has heard that must be let to escape alive!"

Then followed a running fight, in which more than one on both sides felt the plowing of cold lead through his flesh!

But in the end the intrepid Dorn and some of his staunch fellows made their escape.

This battle, however, had engaged only a part of George Caldor's men, not including himself.

He saw that the cattle were not going in the direction he wanted them to.

"Not that way, boys!" he yelled. "Head them off! Drive them over the cliffs!"

In this effort he and several of his men were brought directly before the rushing herd.

They yelled and shot into the ranks of the terrified cattle. Now that the moon disclosed their figures, they took off their jerkins and flitted them in the air before the very eyes of the maddened brutes, as they rode but a few feet beyond the reach of their tossing horns.

Some had blankets tied over one shoulder and under the other; and these, being loosened, they flapped like the wings of gigantic bats.

But all effort was futile. The immense body had got its start; and those in the rear goaded the vanguard on.

This was most hazardous business. A stumble, a fall, and man and horse would be trampled into an indistinguishable mass of mangled flesh and broken bones! Yet so determined was the malignity of the destroyers that the struggle was kept up for miles.

If the herd could be checked or turned, it might be directed toward some cliffs which lay along the western horizon; and in the morning Mars' Jim might look for his magnificent herd on the jagged rocks at their base.

As it was, George Caldor was swept to the eastward before the irresistible tide of tossing brute flesh.

So he came in sight of a twinkling fire on the open prairie.

"Thar's somebody who'll be in hard luck if he hasn't got a good horse!" shouted one of the men, so as to be heard above the roar of hoofs.

"That's not our lookout," returned Caldor, savagely. "A man has no business on the plains without good legs under him."

As they approached, the fire suddenly went

down, and then blazed up higher than before, as if an armful of prairie-grass had been thrown upon it.

This was the fact.

Little Shoo-fly had caught sight of the flashes of the revolvers and interpreted them aright.

"Look! look, Missy Lina!" he had cried. "Don't ye see de shootin'?"

"The shooting? I don't hear it."

"No, no! ye can't hyeah nuffin'. But don't ye see de flashin' ob de pistols?"

"Oh, Clem! I see! I see! There must be somebody riding before the cattle!"

"Ob co'se dah is! It's de cowboys a-tryin' to stop 'em!"

"Then why are we standing here idle? Oh! we may be able to attract their attention, and get them to come to our rescue!"

"Dat's so, we kin—ef we only had a cannon or two to fiah off. But dey couldn't hyeah our revolvehs no mo' dan we kin hyeah deirs."

"No; but the fire! They can see that. Hurry, Clem! Let us pull up some grass and throw on it! We must make it so big that they can't help seeing it! Hurry! hurry! Our lives depend upon our quickness!"

They sprung to the work, with the result which we have seen.

"Now, Clem, stand here before the fire, shake your jacket above your head, and dance as you never danced before in all your life!"

"Hi! hi hi!" yelled Little Shoo-fly, following out her instructions, and adding the full power of his lungs, though he knew that his voice would be drowned by the thunder of the myriad hoofs.

Lina wore a little plaid shawl folded corner to corner and crossed over her bosom. This she waved frantically, involuntarily adding her voice to Clem's.

CHAPTER XI. TREACHERY.

"Boss!" cried Moran once more, "that thar's a woman—blow me ef it ain't!"

"There are two of them."

"T'other's a youngster, by his size."

"Why don't they pull out of that, if they are awake?"

"They're signalin' to us. They have seen the flash of our revolvers. Boss, I reckon they're in a fix. Their stock may have gi'n 'em the slip. I don't see no hosses. Do you?"

"Curse the luck!" growled Caldor. "We can't stop to pick up people who can't take care of themselves!"

"But a woman, Cap?"

"Can blow us as high as a man."

"You're furgittin' our masks."

"That's so."

Caldor made the admission ungraciously enough. He was impatient of anything that came between him and his revenge.

"It's a go, then?"

"Yes; I suppose so."

"We hain't got no time to spare."

Abandoning their efforts to turn the herd, Caldor and Moran put spurs to their horses and rode straight toward the fire.

But, tired as they were, even their fleet mustangs could not gain much on the cattle.

"They are coming! they are coming!" cried Lina, as the horsemen cleared the herd sufficiently to be distinguished from them in the moonlight. "Oh, Clem! we are saved! we are saved!"

They took their positions one on one side of the fire and one on the other, a little back, so that the light falling upon them would make them clearly perceptible to the riders.

Then George Caldor uttered a cry of astonishment.

"My God! It is Miss Merrill!"

"And Reardon's little ducky!" added Moran.

"Blast his leetle pictur! who'd 'a' thunk he'd git ketched like this, after givin' us the slip so cleverly this mornin'?"

It was plain that Moran bore no malice, but rather felt admiration for Little Shoo-fly's skill.

"What can they be doing out here?" asked Caldor, urging his horse to greater speed.

"I'll bet they was sent to Dorn with some kind o' word."

"Of course! To send all the men he could spare north. That accounts for their being so short-handed."

But now they dashed up to the fire.

Lina was shaking her hands and sobbing with suspense.

Caldor drew his horse on its haunches, and bending, seized her under the arms.

She would have assisted him by jumping, but the sight of his masked face filled her with terror; and even in that moment of peril she

stared at him stupidly, and left him to lift her by main strength.

"Shall I fetch along this leetle smoked Yankee?" asked Moran, though he had already given his hand to Little Shoo-fly and thrust forth his foot for him to scramble up on.

"Yes!" growled Caldor. "He is the cause of all this! I'll flay him alive when we get clear of these beasts!"

Forgetful of his mask, he thought that recognition of him had brought that stony look to Lina's face; and it made him savage.

She knew his voice, and cried, with relief—for her fear of him in that moment when her rejection of his suit brought the look of the murderer into his face was now forgotten:

"Oh, Mr. Caldor!"

Then she caught hold of and clung to him as if he were a friend.

That sent the blood spinning through his veins.

"Oh, if we could ride to death like this!" flashed through his brain, as he strained her to his breast.

She could not see the expression of his face; and as his horse flew on she did not notice the closeness of his embrace.

So they rode out of that peril, she in the arms of Mars' Jim's bitterest enemy, and Little Shoo-fly behind one who, at the command of his master would have left him to be trampled by the brutes with the same cheerful good-nature that he was now bearing him to life—and the lash!

George Caldor shaped his course so as to clear the flank of the rushing herd, and let them pass him.

He rode in gloomy silence.

"I have saved her," he mused; "and she will repay me by betraying me!"

It was unreasonable to suppose that she would retain this secret from her accepted lover.

While he pondered this, she felt the chill of his silence. The moment of extreme peril past, she had time to recall their relations. And what was the meaning of the mask he wore? More than that, why was he here, when Mars' Jim had entered upon a race with him for a spot fifty miles away?

She no longer clung to him. She held just enough to keep from falling.

He felt her shrink; and it filled him with bitterness and hatred of his rival.

"Curse him!" he reflected, "with all of chance on his side, am I to be made to serve him too, whether I will or no? My own hand is to be used to secure my own defeat and give him back his bride! Eh?"

He started violently with a new thought.

"What is that? Give him back his bride? Why should I?"

Now strange thoughts began to flash through his brain—thoughts that flushed his cheek and made his eyes glitter in a way that would have made Lina shudder, had she seen them.

"Give him back his bride!" he repeated.

"Ha! ha! ha! what a blind fool! Why, a turn of the hand, and fortune is all with me! Here she has thrown everything into my lap, and I am growling about it! Ha! ha! ha!"

So busy was he with these thoughts that he did not notice that he had gained the flank of the stampede and a *motte* at the same time.

"Hyar we air!" cried Moran.

"En?" asked Caldor, recovering himself with a start.

He looked about. They were now out of danger.

"Let us stop here," he said, and drew up as his horse entered the shelter of the trees.

The herd swept by like a black cloud.

"Signal the boys to come here," he ordered.

He lifted Lina from the withers of his horse, and allowed her to slide to the ground. Then he swung out of the saddle.

Little Shoo-fly reached the ground with the agility of a monkey, and Moran followed.

"Look alive hyar, Snowball!" he cried, briskly. "Help me to fetch sticks fur a rousin' fire."

Little Shoo-fly went to work with a will, and they soon had a blaze crackling.

Meanwhile, the boy's eyes were "as big as saucers." The masks had impressed him strongly. Then he recognized George Caldor's voice.

"Hi!" he reflected. "Dey's up to some debil's work—dat's what dey is! Reckon now dey ain't bullwhackin' fur Mars' Jim fur no good. An' dat Mars' Caldor's at de outs wid Missy Lina. Dat's flat! Ain't said nuffin' to her sence he picked her up. Ain't said nuffin' to dis chile, nudder. 'Low he ain't takin' it so easy dat I tumble him dis mawnin'."

He kept his eyes rolling about, taking in everything that occurred.

George Caldor walked moodily about, with a restlessness unusual to him.

Lina drew near the fire, and called:

"Clem."

Little Shoo-fly was going up to her when Caldor interfered.

"Set that boy to gathering grass," he said, as if he had not heard Lina speak to him.

Little Shoo-fly saw the troubled look on his mistress's face.

"She's afraid o' dat debbil," he reflected. "Ef we git a chance to git out o' dis libely, I's goin' to take it!"

Caldor's men responded to the recalling signal, and he conferred with them apart.

He then put a horse at Lina's service, and mounting, they rode back over the course the cattle had come until they were joined by those of their number who had stayed to fight with Dorn and his aids.

Caldor swore at the men for letting Dorn escape.

Then moodily he took the line of march toward the north.

"Dis ain't de way home!" reflected Little Shoo-fly. "Whah's he gwine to take us to?"

But he had no opportunity to communicate with Lina, and she was ignorant of directions.

However, when they began to penetrate hills her attention was attracted, and looking for the north star, she saw that they were not going eastward.

"Mr. Caldor," she asked, drawing nearer to his side, "are we going in the direction of my home?"

"I cannot go there direct," he answered, "and do not think it safe to send you alone. If you will try to endure my company a little longer, you shall suffer no greater inconvenience."

She was repelled by the bitterness of his words, and drew away without a word further.

He shortly afterward called Moran to his side.

"I want you to take that boy away on some pretext or other, and lose him! Do you understand? Lose him so effectually that he will never find his way back."

"How—"

"That is nothing to me. Do it your own way; only lose him!"

Little Shoo-fly was riding on a horse from the back of which one of Mars' Jim's cowboys had been shot. His quick eye had noticed that the beast was a good one and much fresher than those ridden by Caldor's men.

He had also picked out another on which he proposed to himself to mount Lina, if opportunity offered, and attempt flight from their churlish entertainers.

At the first halt that the party made, at a safe distance from the scene of the stampede, he was accosted by Moran.

"Look a-hyar, youngster, do you like 'coon?" he asked.

"Bet I do, massa!" replied Little Shoo-fly, not the less vivaciously that he suddenly remembered that he had had nothing to eat since dinner, and was decidedly hungry.

"So do I," said Moran. "Suppose we git some. Come along."

Not a little surprised, Little Shoo-fly followed the man.

"Whah's we gwine to git any coons roun' hyeah?" he asked.

"I'll show ye. Come on."

Little Shoo-fly followed, sorely puzzled, for a distance of not less than half a mile, his guide riding in silence. He did not like to be thus separated from Lina, yet was afraid to rouse the hostility of the men in whose power he was, by opposition.

Presently Moran stopped abruptly.

"Look out!" he said, cautiously, glancing up into the trees.

Little Shoo-fly drew up at his side, and looked too, without seeing anything.

"Suppose you go that way, and I'll go this way," said Moran, pointing in the direction he wished Clem to take. "Go slow, now! We may start something at any minute."

Little Shoo-fly had never hunted coons in exactly this way; but he did not venture to question the method of his elder.

He started to do as he was bid; but his back was hardly turned when he heard the click of a revolver.

Somehow, although this was what he might have expected in a hunt, the sharp sound thrilled through him, and roused his suspicions.

He turned his head to look back, and experienced that sensation of the scalp which has been described as the hair rising on end.

He found himself staring down the bore of a revolver over the barrel of which Dan Moran was taking deadly aim.

The next instant came the flash and the quick report; and Little Shoo-fly dropped forward on the neck of his horse!

CHAPTER XII.

IN THE TOILS.

GEORGE CALDOR awaited Moran's return with increasing impatience, and as time passed, with suspicion.

"Selman," he said, at last, "take torches and follow his trail. And, a word!"

He dropped his voice, and whispered the rest in Selman's ear, with a fierceness which confirmed the other in the opinion that George Caldor was an ugly man to "buck ag'in" when he was "riled."

"Follow him to perdition and back, if necessary; and if you find that he is up to any snide game, fetch him back, dead or alive!"

With these instructions Selman set out, taking half a dozen men with him.

George Caldor resumed his rapid pacing back and forth, his frown blacker than ever.

From where she sat, a little apart from the others, Lina watched him uneasily. She had felt a vague misgiving at the departure of Little Shoo-fly.

At last she summoned courage, and went up to Caldor.

"Mr. Caldor," she said, "where have you sent Clem?"

"He turned upon her, the frown not relaxing. "Back to his home," he replied.

"Back home?" she echoed, blankly. "Then why have you not sent me with him?"

"I thought that one would be enough to deliver the message I sent."

"Message? What message? To whom?"

"To Jim Reardon."

Lina bridled at once, at this disrespectful designation of her lover.

"What message did you send to Mr. Reardon?" she asked.

"That I was square with him at last!"

"I do not understand you."

"He will understand me."

"Will you tell me what he will understand?"

"That, gaining all else, he has lost what he most prized!" said Caldor, leaning toward her and fairly hissing the words into her face.

Lina shrunk back; and though she was shaken to the soul by a sense of his meaning which yet seemed too horrible to be true, she asked, in a faltering voice:

"Will you explain yourself a little more clearly?"

"Yes," he said. "Now is as good a time as ever. I have formed my resolve. Nothing in heaven or on earth can change it."

He was now fairly choking with the intensity of his passion.

The girl waited trembling until he resumed.

"This morning I told my love for you."

"Let us not discuss that, if you please!" said Lina, more and more disturbed.

"As you please!" he replied, enraged at her opposition. "There is no need of any discussion whatever, so far as I am concerned."

But she could not let it rest so. Let her have the truth, no matter how terrible.

"What bearing has that on your message to Mr. Reardon?" she asked, tremulously.

"There is but one point of importance. This morning I pleaded, with all the advantage on your side. To-night I still plead, but with our relations somewhat altered. You may not find it matter for laughter, as you did this morning, the moment my back was turned."

She resorted to her interview with Little Shoo-fly, and recalling that unfortunate laugh, showed him that it had no reference to him.

He ignored her explanation.

"Are you engaged to Reardon?" he asked.

She hesitated, her cheeks flaming scarlet. What could be considered an engagement?

Tacitly she was. Mars' Jim had shown his love as plainly as words could do it; and she had accepted him, though no explicit word had passed between them.

She resorted to evasion.

"You have no right to ask me such a question," she said. "But if you must know, Mr. Reardon has never used the word love to me."

"Then you do not love him?" he cried, with a burst, ready to cast himself at her feet. "Oh, Lina, my darling! it is I that love you! I—"

"Stop!" she said, coldly. "That is all over between us. I have said all that I can to you on that subject."

"Well!" he cried, flying again into a passion; "I intend to talk to you about it all our lives long!"

She looked at him with an undefined dread in her eyes, not speaking. She was not ready yet

to acknowledge to herself what his words and manner implied.

"With your will or against it," he went on, "I shall possess you! Lover or master, you can have me as you choose!"

But once more, overcome by his passion, he returned to solicitation.

"But this is not the way! Oh, will you not listen to me? I will take you to the nearest mission. We will be married and then go into Texas to live. I will devote myself to your happiness. I—"

"Enough! I will never consent to anything of the kind. I have already told you that I do not love you, and never shall."

"Well, then listen to the alternative. I shall take you to the mission as I proposed, and at least go through the form of the marriage service—"

"But that will not make me your wife!"

"Oh, yes it will;—or at least it will fix it so that you can at any time make it a legal marriage by merely assenting to it—"

"Which I will never do!—never! never! never!"

She spoke with the vehemence of terror and despairing indignation.

"Don't be too sure of that," he said, confidently. "Other women have been as firm as you think you are now, and yet in the end yielded to their fate."

"Acknowledge a marriage which has been forced upon me—which is revolting to me! You must think me a strange—"

"One moment. I will force you to live with me as my wife; and you may be glad to claim the protection of a legal wife."

"But this is infamous; it is monstrous; it is devilish! You cannot do such a thing—you dare not! I will appeal to all the world for protection from you! No one will countenance you in such fiendish work! It is worse than murder! I would rather be dead, a hundred thousand times!"

She spoke with the rapidity of wild terror. She panted and gasped for breath. She could not find words to express her revolting from this horrible calamity. She thought of Mars' Jim and his rage and despair. It seemed to her that the situation would be so beyond repair that, having crushed her destroyer like a viper beneath his heel, he would kill himself in hopeless chagrin.

Oh, heaven! must their lives be poisoned like this? She wrung her hands. An icy sweat oozed from every pore, though she was consumed with fever. Had man and God deserted her?

George Caldor answered her in cold, measured terms.

"The little world that you will have access to acknowledges me as its master!"

"Oh, it cannot be!" she cried, wildly. "Men are not such brutes! I will cry out against you even now!"

She turned to make her appeal to the men who stood at a little distance.

"Try it!" said Caldor, not attempting to interfere with her.

"Gentlemen!" she cried, walking rapidly toward them, "I claim your protection. You are men; you have hearts; you have mothers and sisters! You cannot stand and see a woman made the victim of anything so inexpressibly cruel, so awful, so— Oh! oh!"

Tears were streaming from her eyes; she wrung her hands; and sobs choked her utterance.

The men dropped their eyes to the ground, and were plainly uneasy before the sight of her distress. But there was no generous arousing of chivalric feeling in her defense. They frowned, as if annoyed.

"Gentlemen! gentlemen!" she pleaded, hope dying out of her heart, "Mr. Caldor threatens me with a forced marriage. I do not love him. I told him so, only this morning. But in spite of that he says that he will compel me to go through the form of a marriage and then to live with him, without regard to my wishes. He is your employer—"

Ah! she felt the force of that relation!

"But—but," she sobbed, "you cannot uphold him in anything so wicked as this!"

"Ef the boss is willin' to marry yer, what air ye kickin' about?" asked one of the men, roughly. "Ye're devilish lucky to have him take so much trouble, to my way o' thinkin'!"

She stood staring at the speaker dumbly.

She looked from him to the other men; and not one of them said anything, though they shifted uneasily from one foot to the other.

The conviction of utter uselessness of any further appeal to them settled down upon her heart like a weight of lead.

Without another word she turned away, and went and sat down by herself, and fell to shivering and shuddering with a nameless dread.

Caldor resumed his feverish walk, more fiercely determined than ever by her opposition.

"I will break her!" he muttered. "I will have her at my feet, glad of a smile from me. Curse her! She shall learn to watch to see whether I am in good humor or not. She shall fawn upon me like a slave, like one of those Sultanas, who are no doubt as proud as she when they are first carried away from their Caucasian homes. I will let her see that she can have kindness or harshness, whichever she bids for; and she will be glad to compromise, and take what good she can get out of life."

And yet, as he spoke, he knew that there was a difference between the Oriental women to whom he referred and one of Anglo-Saxon blood and rearing.

After a long interval, during which he chafed with impatience, Selman and his party returned.

Lina looked up. Here was another chance. Selman was more intelligent than the others.

She sprung toward him. But Caldor's impatience carried him before her; and she recoiled to await the end of his interview.

CHAPTER XIII.

A PLUCKY LITTLE WOMAN.

"WELL?" exclaimed Caldor, hurriedly.

"Boss," answered Selman, "we couldn't find hide nor hair of either one of 'em. But we found somethin' else that—"

"What else?"

"Blood! A leetle ways from hyar we lost the trail, the ground bein' so rocky; but thar was only one way to go, so we kept it fur about half a mile. Thar we come onto a pool o' blood that showed as how somebody had been plugged. Then thar was signs o' the body bein' drug to the aige o' the cliffs an' heaved over. Thar was no way o' gittin' down, an' we couldn't see the bottom. More'n that, the country opened up so's you could go in any direction, but was so rocky that the old feller himself couldn't pick up no trail. So, allowin' that you'd be wantin' to be on the move, I reckoned I'd better come an' report before goin' any further."

"That's all right," said Caldor, with satisfaction.

He wondered at Moran's continued absence, but that the deed of violence had been done was the thing of importance; and he doubted not that the man would join him later with a satisfactory explanation.

"Meanwhile, here is a lady who appears to have something to say to you."

Her heart sinking at this evidence of his indifference, Lina availed herself of her opportunity.

"Oh, sir!" she cried. "You are my last hope! You will save me, I know!"

"From what?" asked the man, as her sobs stifled her voice.

In a few rapid words she told him her strait.

He listened coolly, and then answered her:

"I allow the boss knows his own business best. He pays me fur bullwhackin'. When that's done, an' I git my money, I hain't no fault to find with him ef he hain't no fault to find with me."

"But I am a woman. I am helpless. He holds me as a prisoner against my will, without a shadow of right. He meditates against me a crime at which the very fiends must shudder! What could you do against a woman equal to this? I would rather be killed me! I would rather be burned at the stake! You are a man. You cannot be so dead to all human feeling as to stand coldly by and see this cowardly act perpetrated."

"I kin mind my own business, that I kin do!" said Selman, doggedly.

Then she fell back from him in dismay.

"Are there such wretches in the world?" she cried, breathlessly. "Can God look down on them and be dumb?"

"That has been the despairing cry of suffering humanity since the world began," said Caldor, with a sardonic smile. "Yet the lightnings do not fall; Heaven smiles on with unruffled serenity."

She did not look at him. She made one more appeal to the crowd, this time descending to their own level.

"Men!" she cried, "I am to be James Reardon's wife—"

"You lied to me!" interrupted Caldor, fiercely, turning livid with jealous rage.

She did not heed him. She kept on unbrokenly.

"He loves me. I know that he would give all that he has in the world to save me from this horrible fate. I promise you that he shall make the fortune of the man who helps me to escape. I have money of my own—over five thousand dollars. I pledge you my word of honor that it shall be equally distributed between the men who stand by me. This, with what you'll receive from Mr. Reardon, will give to every one of you more than you can earn in a year certainly. I am offering to each one of you, if you all come over to my side, from a thousand to fifteen hundred dollars. All I ask is that you shall put me on a horse under the guidance of the little negro boy with whom you found me, and hold this man back from following us for twelve hours."

At last she was speaking in a language that they could understand.

George Caldor saw the covetous flash in the eyes of his men, as they covertly glanced at one another, each to see how his colleagues were affected.

He knew that the best of them would sell him out for a consideration. Yet he was perfectly unconcerned.

He laughed lightly and snapped his fingers.

"My dear young lady," he said, "your offer is a shrewd one; but it comes too late. If you had approached us in the same way an hour or two ago, I don't know but I might have made terms with you myself. But that has happened since then which puts it out of the question. Since then we have stampeded Jim Reardon's cattle and killed three or four of his men. The man who helps you puts a halter about his neck, by admitting that he was concerned in this raid. You see, we are all in the same boat, and must stand by one another."

The faces of his men dropped. They saw that he had them, if any meditated treachery.

Lina saw it too.

"And these are men!" she cried, in an agony of disappointment.

"You will learn to take men as you find them," said Caldor, with a laugh; "and in the end you will come to see that you can do worse than look to me."

"You?" she cried, with a sudden fury that transformed her. "Never! never! Do you suppose that I will tamely submit to this infamous outrage? I hold life sacred; but God and the angels must look on with approval while I rid the earth of such a viper as you in defense of my honor! You shall not destroy my life and break James Reardon's heart, if there is skill in this hand and firmness in these nerves!"

And somewhere from the folds of her dress she produced a small revolver, and aimed it at George Caldor's heart.

"Now," she declared, "I purpose to kill you, if you make it necessary! To begin with, throw up your hands!"

George Caldor was thunderstruck.

"Kill me!" he repeated, blankly.

"Throw up your hands!" she directed once more, with a flash of the eye and a ring in her voice which was a revelation of character to him.

And to his amazement, he saw the hammer of the self-cocking revolver which she held slowly raised.

This evidence of the firmness of her nerves was the most impressive manifestation of her high courage and implacable purpose that she could have given him.

With whitening lips he obeyed her, as if she had been the most desperate man who had ever voiced that well-known command.

"Now, command one of your men to disarm you! But first they must all understand that I will not be trifled with. If I see the slightest evidence of a treacherous design, I will make sure of your life at least."

"Boys," said the leader, who now really trembled for his life, "obey her."

Selman stepped forward and relieved him of revolvers and bowie.

"Throw them there on the ground!" she ordered, indicating the spot.

He complied.

"Put your own arms in the same place."

Selman hesitated.

"Obey!" commanded Caldor.

He did so.

"Step apart there to the left."

This was done.

"Now let your men, one at a time, come forward, leave their arms there, and join Mr. Selman. Remember, you are all under my eye; and if one tries to sneak away, the life of your leader will pay the penalty. I may have to kill myself the moment afterward; but I will have his life!"

"Boys," said Caldor, "there's no use in deny-

ing that she's got me; and I don't want to have to pay for any of your funny business. Give it up."

And by this means this gentlest of women, driven by desperation to show her true metal, drew the teeth of the human wolves that surrounded her.

"Let one man separate from the rest and gather an armful of pine knots suitable for torches."

While this was being done, she asked Caldor: "What have you done with Clem?"

"I don't know what has become of him," he replied, truthfully enough. "One of the men took him out to help hunt some fresh meat, and neither of them has returned. If you remember the man who was with me when I had the pleasure of picking you up on the prairie, you will see that he is not here now. I sent several others to look for them, so that we could be going, and they were unable to find them."

Lina paused in perplexity. She could not desert her friend Clem. She knew that he would not desert her.

Presently she formed a resolve.

"I will hold him as a hostage for Clem's safe delivery! This works so nicely for my preservation, Clem shall have the benefit of it too!"

To the man who had brought the torches, she said:

"Lead forward two horses. And see that you pick out those that you got from Mr. Reardon's men. I will not have the jaded animals you have ridden all day. Make no mistake about this; for I know a fresh horse when I see him as well as you do."

"I reckon you're up to most things, miss!" said the man, with a grin.

The horses were brought.

"Now then, men, form in two ranks and march on before. You, sir, lead the horses at the head of the column. Let two torches be lighted and carried next to the horses. Mr. Caldor, oblige me by going just before me."

In the midst of this maneuver Lina suddenly tripped over a twig, and fell to the ground.

With a yell of perfectly fiendish triumph George Caldor sprung toward her. He saw his chance to throw off this humiliation of being entrapped with all his men by a woman.

Lina's heart sunk in despair. She had fallen upon the hand that held her revolver, and could not hope to free it before he would have her in his remorseless grip.

CHAPTER XIV.

"GO 'WAY, SHOO-FLY!"

To be strictly accurate, we should have put the dropping of Little Shoo-fly forward upon the neck of his horse *before* the flash of Dan Moran's revolver.

He was in time to escape with the ball grazing his shoulder.

In a flash he realized the purpose of murder, and that the blow struck at him menaced Lina as well.

"Curse you, ye leetle Paddy's-flea!" cried Moran, firing a second shot.

To the ruffian all this was a good joke. But he was soon to have cause to "laugh on the other side of his face."

Before the second shot reached him, Little Shoo-fly had slipped from the back of his horse, retaining the bridle-rein, however, in his left hand.

The bullet pierced one of the animal's ears, and this, with the sudden jerk on the bridle, caused him to toss his head and start back.

The movement brought him directly between Little Shoo-fly and his assailant, so that the boy was protected from a third shot.

"Now, boss, what's sass fur de goose is sass fur de gander!" said our little hero.

Even as he spoke a flash came from behind his rampart of horse-flesh.

With a cry as short as it was sharp, Dan Moran jerked back on the rein, and his horse reared and threw him over backward.

While the animal was plunging, and before he could break away, Little Shoo-fly caught his bridle.

There was no need to give any further attention to Dan Moran. He lay on his back, motionless, with a bullet in his head, stone dead!

"Dat settles him!" said Little Shoo-fly, having secured the horses, and then carefully examined his would-be murderer. "Now what is I to do next? Reckon Mars' Caldor will be lookin' fur his butcher. Better tumble him ober de rocks. De sooner dey find him, de sooner dey'll be huntin' dis chile!"

He therefore dragged the body to a precipice and rolled it over.

"Now den, dis hyeah means dat dat Caldor

ain't huntin' no good fur Missy Lina. He ain't takin' her home nohow. Reckon he ain't been hangin' roun' de ranch fur nuffin' when Mars' Jim was away. He don't 'spec' dat I seen him cut an' run when I come down to de falls dis mawnin'. He wasn't lookin' as mad as de berry debbil 'kaze Missy Lina say she lobe him, I bet! Reckon now, she gib him de sack;—dat's what's in his crow? Mars' Jim he's euchered him out o' dat lan', ur he wouldn't be down hyeah stampedin' de cattle wid his face in a blanket. He's boun' fur to git squar' wid Mars' Jim. Ef he run off wid Missy Lina, dat 'u'd be wuss'n ef he dribe all de stock ober de cliffs;—dat's so! Dah ain't nobody but Shoo-fly to save her. What 'll Mars' Jim say ef I let her git stoled?"

The more he reflected on the situation, the more clearly he saw the necessity of acting at once.

"Ef I run to tell Mars' Jim, whar'll dat Caldor be when we come back? Dat's what I want to know! 'Twouldn't do no good fur Mars' Jim to git him an' cut him up into inch pieces arter he had broke Missy Lina's heart, dat's so! She lobe Mars' Jim, an' Mars' Jim he lobe her; an' dis hyeah Caldor ain't gwino to spile all dat ef I kin help it!"

With this resolve, he went to the horses and examined them both thoroughly.

He saw that Moran had found a better horse than his own among those ridden by some of Mars' Jim's dead cowboys, and had effected an exchange without troubling himself about the equity of the case.

"Dat's lucky fur me," said Little Shoo-fly. "It gib me two fresh hosses, ef it comes to hard ridin'."

He now took a roundabout way to regain the vicinity of the halting-place, so as to approach it from the eastern side.

Tying his horses at a safe distance, he crept forward on hands and knees, to see if he could get access to Lina.

What he saw caused his eyes to dilate wider then ever before in his life with astonishment. It was Lina holding her ruffianly captor at bay at the point of her revolver.

"Hi, golly!" he ejaculated, under his breath.

For a moment he could scarcely keep from betraying his presence; but on second thought he resolved to await developments, and come at some critical moment, if such arose.

When Lina fell, and all that she had fought for so desperately and bravely seemed lost, he sprung forward with the cry:

"Go 'way, shoo-fly!"

And George Caldor found himself brought up under the muzzle of a revolver the deadly accuracy of which he had cause to know.

"Oh, Clem! Clem!" fairly screamed Lina. "Don't let him touch me!"

"Don't ye worry, missy! I's got 'im!—hyuh? hyuh!—jes' like you had 'im! Hold on, gemmen! We's got anoddeh half-hitch on dis hyeah woman-fighter!"

The men could scarcely suppress their amusement at Caldor's discomfiture. All the humiliation they considered his, not theirs. Their hands were tied to save his life.

"To be fetched to taw by a leetle nig like that!" muttered one of them under his breath.

And this was what especially galled Caldor. He stormed, he swore, he threatened; he stamped his foot and ordered Little Shoo-fly to lower his weapon.

"No go, massa!" laughed our little hero. "Reckon now, missy wouldn't like to put a hole frough yo' carcass; but ef I could knock you ober wid de law on my side—hi! wouldn't dat be a fedder in my cap! Somebody do som'fin', so's I kin put a sky-light in his upper story! Hyuh! hyuh! hyuh!"

By this time Lina was on her feet again.

"Oh, Clem!" she cried, "we're safe now! I'll hug you, and kiss you too, when we are safely out of this!"

"Will ye, missy? Ki! how's dat, boys? But won't ye let me touch him up a leetle—only jest a leetle?"

"No, Clem. Only stay beside me; and if anything happens, there will be two of us. But don't spare him if it becomes necessary to shoot! Let the one shot lay him dead at your feet! I would rather die a thousand deaths than fall into his hands."

"Don't you be skeered about me lettin' him off, missy! De only danger is dat I'll git a crick in elbow, an' let off too soon! Better walk a chalk line, Mars' Caldor; 'kase ef you make me nervous, dah ain't no tellin' what I may do!"

And Little Shoo-fly laughed in the face of the humiliated man.

"Dah's two mo'e hosses dat I got," said Little

Shoo-fly. "Dat Moran hab one on 'em, an' I hab t'odder. Dem 'ah an' de ones you got am all the ones dat dey git from Mars' Jim's men. Ef we git a little start wid dem, dat's all we want."

So the four horses were led out from the mountainous country to the plain; and here Lina commanded a halt.

They were now full two miles away from any horses other than those that she held control of; and their arms were equally distant.

"Now, men," said Lina, "about face, and make such time as you please back to your arms and horses. Mr. Caldor, you will oblige me by standing where you are for the present."

Supposing that she only meant to hold him until she was fairly in the saddle, Caldor offered no opposition.

When the men were at a safe distance, she went on:

"Hold him, Clem, until I get into the saddle; and then I will relieve you."

Then Little Shoo-fly mounted, and by her instruction took one of the horses in lead.

"But we want 'em bofe," he said.

"I have use for the other. Mr. Caldor, I'll trouble you to mount him."

"What?"

"The other horse is at your service."

"What for?"

His suspicions were aroused. And they were well grounded, too!

"I purpose to take you to Mr. Reardon, so that he can hold you to a strict account for the mischief you have done him," she said, firmly.

"What?" he fairly screamed. "Be led to the gallows by a woman?"

He said not another word, but with a howl of fury leaped away after his men, taking the risk from which he had shrunk until now.

"Stop! stop, Clem!" cried Lina; or he would have been dropped in his tracks.

"Is you gwino to let him git away?" shouted Little Shoo-fly, excitedly.

"Yes, yes! It is better so. It is bad enough to shoot a man even in self-defense. I would not have such a thing on my conscience for any amount of property. We have a change of horses, and both fresh, while his are all fagged out; so we have nothing further to fear from him in the way of personal injury. Come! let us make the most of our advantage, however."

Little Shoo-fly looked longingly at the fleeing villain.

"I only wish't I could hab one crack!" he said.

But again Lina urged him to homeward flight; and he yielded.

"Look a-hyeh, Missy Lina," said Little Shoo-fly, when they had proceeded far enough so as to be out of sight of their baffled enemies, "dat 'ah Caldor is a heap riled; an' I allow he ain't one o' the kind what lets go easy."

"I'm afraid not."

"Well, now, he knows dat de ranch 'am mighty short-handed. Dah ain't nobody dah 'cept de ole marse."

"But we will get there long before Mr. Caldor can; so he cannot harm him."

"S'pose we do git dah, missy? Den dah won't be nobody dah but ole marse an' me. An' you! Ki! reckon we'll hab to count you in, after dis! You is as good as a fo'-hoss team an' a yalleh dorg undeh de waggin! Hyuh! hyuh! hyuh! how you make dat 'ah Caldor stan' roun'! But s'pose we do git dah; an' dis hyeah ole debbil comes wid all his men! We won't stan' no show! He's in fur it now, an' he jes' as leab burn de ranch an' skulp eberybody he find dah!"

This was a new thought to Lina. The terrible possibilities involved shocked her beyond words. She thought of the kind old people, Jim's parents, who had given her, a recent orphan, so warm a welcome that the dreary chill of loneliness had been lifted from her heart. In imagination she saw the brave old man fighting desperately to the last, to fall with his life-blood staining his silver locks! She saw the woman who had walked so many years by his side lying broken-hearted, with her despairing arm clasped about the body that would never again know her touch of love!

Ever thoughtful of others, the noble girl cried at once:

"Clem, we can't let this terrible thing happen! We must warn Mr. Reardon. Do you know the way to the new grazing-ground?"

"You jest bet I do! I wouldn't 'a' got lost dis afternoon, missy, only it was on de perairy whah eberything looks jest alike; an' de clouds knocked me!" said Little Shoo-fly, chagrined at his failure. "But ye can't lose me in dese hyeah mountains!—dat ye can't!"

It was not an easy thing for a girl wholly un-

used to this wild life to face the unknown perils of the mountains added to the danger of again falling into the hands of her enemy; but with high courage and devotion to those that she loved Lina put aside all sense of fatigue—and indeed she could scarcely sit in her saddle—and fear, and turned her horse's head northward.

Little Shoo-fly had a little jerked meat and a flask of whisky which he had taken from the body of Moran before pushing it over the cliffs, as also the arms and ammunition of the ruffian.

The meat appeased their hunger, and the liquor gave them artificial strength to endure the task before them.

Day was just breaking when they reached the vicinity of the new grazing site.

"Tain't mo'n fo' or five miles mo'," Little Shoo-fly was saying, when they suddenly found themselves confronted by a party of mounted men.

"Blow me ef that ain't them now!" cried one of the men, under his breath. "Boys, the boss is ravin' crazy. Ef we kin hitch onto them, it'll be money in our pockets—an' don't ye furgit it!"

"Dat Caldor gang!" ejaculated Little Shoo-fly, breathlessly.

And looking up, Lina beheld one of the men whom she had held under her revolver—no less a person than Selman!—accompanied by several others, whom she had never seen before.

"Bout!" shouted Little Shoo-fly, wheeling the horse he bestrode and dropping the leading-lines of the others.

With her heart in her mouth, Lina imitated him; and together they dashed away with their pursuers at their heels.

They had gone but a few rods in the new direction, when they encountered another man on horseback.

Then the hunted girl gave up in despair.

CHAPTER XV. IN A "POCKET."

BUT then came a ringing shout from Little Shoo-fly, so full of delight that there could be no question that he saw deliverance in the newcomer.

"Bamley! Mars' Bamley!"

"This way!" cried Bamley, in return.

And the next instant the fugitives passed him at a bound, and he reined in between them and their enemies.

The first thing that his experienced eye saw was that Lina could not much longer endure the terrible strain to which she had been subjected.

She swayed as she rode, her seat the less secure in that she was mounted on a man's saddle, and any unexpected turn of her horse might send her whirling to the ground.

"She'll never reach the new ground at this rattlin' gait," he said to himself. "I'll put her in the pocket—that's what I'll do; an' we kin stand ag'in' 'em thar tell Tophet freezes over!"

With this happy thought, he called out to Little Shoo-fly:

"To the left! to the left!"

"Dat ain't de way to de new groun'," objected our little hero.

"Do as I tell you! I know what I am about!"

There was no time for debate, and concluding to "go it blind" on the instruction of one in whom he knew Mars' Jim reposed much confidence, Little Shoo-fly reined into a glen which opened at right-angles to the course they were pursuing.

A short ride brought them to a spot which the reader will recognize as the mouth of the pocket at which we left Bamley watching, the night before.

He had watched without event, until before daylight a single horseman dashed up in a great flurry, his jaded beast showing how furiously he had ridden the night through.

To the sentinel in the mouth of the pocket he had cried, with so little caution that every word was distinctly audible to the secreted scout:

"Patsy, the jig's up! Rout out all the boys in a hurry! We've got to cut this section in short order!"

"Phwat's the row?" asked Patsy Magoon.

"Didn't yez shthampade the cr'atur's, I dunno?"

"You bet we did, an' hooked onto Reardon's pretty one in the bargain; but—"

By this time they were beyond ear-shot of the deeply interested scout.

While they were striking camp in the pocket, he busied himself getting his horse in position so that he would be ready to strike out to report to his employer as soon as he had learned all he could from any chance words dropped on their way out.

What was his surprise when the little handful rode forth, eagerly listening to a more detailed

account of what had happened to the southward.

Then Bamley learned that he had been watching a "mare's nest," and that Caldor and the bulk of his men had given him the slip.

Little Shoo-fly was mistaken in supposing that the four horses he and Lina had brought away were the only ones that had been got from Mars' Jim's cowboys. There was another, and a good one; and on this Caldor had dispatched Selman, to fetch away those he had left in the pocket to deceive his opponents.

He had outstripped Little Shoo-fly and Lina by less than half an hour, with the result described.

The out-going party rode toward the east, to reach the plains before turning southward; and Bamley, taking the same general direction at a slight angle, had outstripped them, when they met Little Shoo-fly and Lina coming in.

In beating his retreat, Little Shoo-fly turned to the northward; and hearing the shots and yells, and curious to know what they meant, Bamley had ridden southward, thus encountering the fugitives in the nick of time.

Directing them back over the route he had come, he guided them into the now empty "pocket," where he hoped to hold out against all comers until Mars' Jim came along in the morning, under the direction of Herrick, to learn what had become of him.

"Halt, hyar, Shoo-fly!" he ordered, as they dashed through the mouth of the pocket. "But you, miss, keep on tell you git out o' pistol-range. Then you're safe anywar in thar. Ye needn't be skeert. Nobody kin git to ye only through this hyar gut; an' the boss is only a few mile from hyar, an' he'll be along by sun-up."

However, her nerves sorely tried, Lina felt safer close to her defenders. So she pulled up her horse the moment she had turned the angle of the rocks, and dismounted.

She was scarcely on her feet when she staggered with dizziness, and would have fallen to the ground but that she caught at a sapling.

Little Shoo-fly sprang to her assistance, and at her direction led her to a place where she would be protected from the bullets of the enemy, and at the same time be near enough to converse with Bamley.

"Take it easy, miss," he said. "Set down an' be quiet fur a minute, an' you'll come round all right. I reckon you've had a purty tough ride, fur one as ain't usen to it, comin' all the way from the ranch."

"Tell me about Mr. Reardon," said Lina.

"Did you have any difficulty with Mr. Caldor?"

"Haw! haw! haw!" laughed the borderman, at the recollection of Caldor's dip in the brook.

"I reckon he didn't trouble us none. It would 'a' been money out o' his pocket fur to try it on."

He then told Lina of the race and its results; and in return she narrated what had taken place at the south.

Bamley with difficulty suppressed some pretty forcible expletives that rose to his lips; and his disgust with himself for being so gulled was so ludicrous that even in that moment of anxiety Lina could not repress a smile.

The enemy outside held a council of war, the outcome of which was a scout sent to the northward to reconnoiter Mars' Jim's camp, and another dispatched post-haste to the southward to summon Caldor to one more effort to get possession of Lina, while the rest staid to watch the prey.

In due time the first-mentioned scout returned with intelligence which caused great rejoicing on the part of the besiegers.

"Boys, we've got 'em!" cried Selman, who had assumed command. "Let's poke 'em up on the inside with three rattles an' a button."

They made the rocks ring with their cheers and the derisive tiger at the end.

Then the outlaw, for the gratification of his malicious triumph, shouted:

"Hollo, in thar! How air ye comin' on? Have you hyeared anythin' of a man called Jim Reardon, lately?"

Not a sound in response came from the picket.

The outlaws exhausted their wit in taunting gibes. Still, only the echoes replied.

"Look a-hyar, boys," said Selman, finally.

"It would be a deuce of a note, ef they should happen to give us the slip out o' some back door that we don't know nothin' about!"

"Ef they kin climb with a woman whar it would stump the best man in our crowd," replied one, who had been in there over night, "they're solid! Ef they can't, they're fixed!"

"That's all right; but hang me ef I would hanker to meet the boss with the news that our big find was a last year's bird's nest."

"Suppose ye go in thar an' nose 'em out!" proposed one of the men.

"That's jest what I propose to do."

Having arranged for their support, Selman preceded his men into the gut which led into the pocket.

Cautiously he advanced, until he stood entirely within the inclosure of rocks, having discovered nothing.

"Boys!" he said, "they've gone, fur a fact. Right in hyar with ye, an' foller 'em up sharp!"

They were about to obey this command, when they saw him start, and his jaw drop with dismay.

The next instant he threw up his hand, and his revolver exploded. But another report preceded his by an instant, and with a short, sharp cry he reeled and fell backward.

His men were rushing through the gut, when they found themselves confronted by Bamley and Little Shoo-fly, both with a revolver in either hand.

"Give 'em Hail Columbia!" shouted the scout.

"Go 'way, shoo-fly!" responded our little hero.

And four self-cocking revolvers raked the defile with leaden hail.

Three men went down, with "finis" written at the end of their villainous record, and the rest beat an incontinent retreat, but not altogether unscathed.

"Dat's de time we fotch em!" cried Little Shoo-fly, fairly dancing with delight.

"But that only shows how we'd git it, if we tried to pass that openin'," responded Bamley, coolly. "Youngster, now's the time to go fur reinforcements. Ef we wait until they git Caldor and all his gang hyar, we won't stand no show ag'in' a rush. Air you monkey enough to scramble up the rocks som'ers hyarabout?"

"I kin try it. An' I kin do it ef annybody kin."

"Then 'light out, an' keep a-goin' until you strike the boss."

Little Shoo-fly took off his shoes and slung them over his back. Then he went about the pocket in search of a place which could be scaled.

It was not easily found; but at last he made the attempt, and after not a little risk to his neck, accomplished his task.

He had the prospect of a long tramp on foot before him; but he had not gone far when what was his delight to come upon one of the led horses which he had been forced to abandon in making his escape from Selman and his men.

Mounted once more, he dashed away toward the new grazing ground.

Meanwhile, Bamley had turned to Lina, and said:

"Miss, thar's goin' to be hot work hyar, ef the boss ain't on hand before Caldor chips in, the which they've more'n likely sent fur him. It's you that they're after, an' you'll stan' all the better chance ef you're hid away somewhar so's they can't find you too easy."

"But I am not useless," protested Lina. "I will stay here and help you to defend this pass. You already know that I can handle a revolver."

"That's all right, miss; but with twenty men comin' through thar, we won't stan' no show to keep 'em out, like we do with half a dozen. Once in hyar, you can't handle yourself like as if you was a man. But ef I don't have to stan' up before you, I kin keep 'em busy for some time, dodgin' in an' out an' round about; an' every minute that we stand 'em off is jest one more minute fur the boss to git hyar."

Lina was finally convinced that this was the wiser course; and as there was little danger that another attempt would be made to effect an entrance before reinforcements came, Bamley left the pass unguarded while he took her to a place of hiding.

Arrived at the new grazing-ground, Little Shoo-fly stood in dismay. He knew the cause of his enemies' hilarity. The place was deserted. Mars' Jim was gone!

Then the hours passed, and no help came to the besieged.

Bamley grew more and more anxious. Something must have happened to Little Shoo-fly, or to Mars' Jim and his men.

At last the sound of voices outside apprised him of the arrival of his enemies.

Then he placed himself where, hidden from view himself, he could mark the first man who entered the pocket.

He had no doubt that it would be Caldor; for whatever his faults, he was no coward, and would not ask his men to take a risk from which he shrunk.

"I'll fix him at any rate!" mused the scout. "With him slung cold, the leetle gal won't have so much to be afeard of. Bless her heart! she's

a spunky one, an' she unbeknownst to this way o' life until lately."

Even as he spoke, there came a silent rush through the gut.

True to Bamley's expectation, George Caldor headed his men.

They found nobody to oppose them until they were inside the inclosure. Then came a single shot which caused George Caldor to start convulsively.

Looking in the direction whence the shot came, they discovered a puff of white smoke rising from some bushes.

Instantly a shower of bullets fairly riddled the place, and with a yell the men rushed toward it.

They found nothing there.

But a second shot from another point once more showed that their leader was to be the target of this hide-and-seek warfare.

A second time George Caldor escaped with his life, though, as before, not without a painful token of his enemy's determined hostility.

And yet again the hidden foe eluded his pursuers.

They thought it was Bamley and Little Shoo-fly; and scattering in every direction, they proceeded to beat the cover with a vigilance that must soon start their game.

From her hiding-place Lina watched this ticklish game, until suddenly a view-halloo was set up, and a wild chase swept the glen.

Faithful Bamley led them away from Lina, in the hope that she might see her chance to slip out of the pocket, and so escape them for good.

But our heroine was not made of that kind of stuff.

"Oh! I cannot leave him to struggle on alone against such odds!" she cried.

And springing forward, she ran to intercept his pursuers.

She was in time to confront them with a leveled revolver in either hand and her resolute eyes flashed defiance.

"Back! back, you cowards!" she cried. "How many does it require of you to overcome one man?"

But while she spoke, and ere she had taken the blood of any of her enemies on her hands, she heard a mocking laugh at her back, and the next instant a pair of arms were thrown about her, rendering her a helpless prisoner.

She writhed round, to find George Caldor's lips within an inch of her own, and his eyes flashing malicious triumph into hers.

"Ha! ha! ha!" he laughed. "Where's Jim Reardon now?"

"Here!" yelled a stentorian voice, and—

CHAPTER XVI.

LITTLE SHOO-FLY'S LUCKY SHOT.

MARS' JIM had proceeded southward full ten miles, when he and his men were observed by another party which happened to be in a *motte* when he came in sight.

"There they go!" muttered George Caldor, for it was he, "no doubt called southward by some of the fellows who escaped us. Well, let him go. That takes him out of our way just when we can best spare him."

So it happened that he entered the pocket in pursuit of Lina with a feeling of perfect safety.

But a little further on Mars' Jim was stopped by one of his own men—no less a person than Dorn, who had been following Caldor up.

From him Mars' Jim got the details of what had happened at the south, and learned that the herd, rushing out on the plains instead of toward the cliffs, could be reherded without much loss.

By watching his enemies, Dorn had learned of the rescue, captivity and escape of Lina and Little Shoo-fly; that, his identity betrayed, Caldor had not taken the time to collect and bury his dead, but had at once gone in pursuit of the girl, and lastly that the fugitives had turned northward, evidently to seek Mars' Jim himself.

"And we have passed both parties!" cried Mars' Jim, in despair. "About, men! We may be in time to save them yet!"

Pressing hotly after his foes, he was next encountered by Little Shoo-fly, who informed him of the strait in which he had left Lina and Bamley.

Thus guided directly to the pocket, Mars' Jim gained on the jaded horses of his enemies, until he reached the mouth of the pocket but a few minutes behind Caldor.

The chase after Bamley was in full course, and Lina had just rushed to his aid at the risk of whatever might befall herself, when Mars' Jim dashed through the gut on horseback.

"Where's Jim Reardon now?" mockingly

cried the triumphant villain, with his arms about his victim.

"Here!" shouted the outraged lover, with his hand on his revolver and his eye selecting the spot where he should plant his bullet.

But with the quickness of light George Caldor drew his own weapon and turned it upon the girl who had stretched out her arms, crying:

"Jim! Jim! oh, Jim!"

"Ha! ha! ha!" he laughed, mockingly, as he saw the lover rein in his horse with a sudden whitening of the lips. "I have learned a trick from this little beauty herself. I have you as she had me a few hours ago. Lift a finger, and the goes into eternity ahead of me!"

Mars' Jim was in despair. He could only stare at the ruthless villain, momentarily expecting the explosion of his revolver. He scarcely dared breath, lest he should precipitate the catastrophe.

But Little Shoo-fly saw that Caldor's eyes were fixed on his principal foe, and that he—Shoo-fly—was therefore out of range of his vision.

It was a moment that demanded quick execution. He thought and acted perhaps more quickly than a man with a more comprehensive view of the danger might have done.

His revolver flashed, and George Caldor's right arm fell to his side, shattered, the weapon that had menaced Lina's life dropping to the ground from his relaxed grasp.

A moment of breathless pause; then a yell of triumph and delight.

Caldor saw that he was baffled, and sprung away.

"After him! after him!" shouted Mars' Jim.

His men dashed in pursuit; but he, with more concern for his darling than for his enemy, now that he could do no more harm, sprung from his saddle, and caught her, almost fainting, to his breast.

"Oh, Jim!"

"Lina, my dearest!"

Her arms were about his neck. His lips were to hers. All peril was behind them, and the happiness of a long life of perfect concord before.

An old man who loved both with an equal affection threw his arms about them, whispering:

"God bless you, my children!"

Then his wonted humor came to the surface, and he added, jovially:

"Jim, if it was anybody but you, I'd call him out!—hang me if I wouldn't!"

"But where's Little Shoo-fly?" asked Mars' Jim, looking about for the boy. "We owe all our happiness to him."

Shoo-fly had gone in hot pursuit of the baffled ruffian.

Caldor, as fleet as a deer, had escaped any mortal wound, though pierced in several places by the shower of bullets sent after him. Even with his broken arm, he had succeeded in mounting a horse, and had dashed away. But, hotly pressed, with Little Shoo-fly foremost among his pursuers, he had dug his spurs into his horse's flanks so viciously that the animal, frantic with pain, had taken the bit in its teeth and run away.

Then the bridle had broke, and the beast became wholly unmanageable.

In this condition he had torn along the ledges, until suddenly brought to a sheer precipice. Here, unable to check his headlong speed, he had leaped out into space, and gone down! down! to a nameless doom!

On his return, Little Shoo-fly was overwhelmed with praises and expressions of gratitude. In the midst of it all, he looked at Lina with a twinkle in his eyes, and said:

"Pears to me you's furgittin' yo' promise!"

For an instant the girl looked blankly at him. Then she suddenly blushed crimson.

"What's this?" cried Mars' Jim, gayly, scenting fun.

Little Shoo-fly only rolled his eyes and threw his head back so as to stretch his mouth to its widest capacity.

"I'm afraid," said Lina, laughing through her confusion, "that, in the exuberance of my relief and gratitude, I promised Clem a kiss for coming so cleverly to my rescue when Mr. Caldor had me at his mercy."

Mars' Jim roared with laughter. He was so happy that it was easy to laugh just then. But as soon as he could fetch breath, he made a grab at our little hero, shouting:

"A kiss! Let me catch you at it, you young rascal!"

But Clem eluded him, cut a pigeon's-wing, and yelled:

"Go 'way, Shoo-fly! Hyuh! hyuh! hyuh!"

THE END.

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98 William Street, New York.